MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1962

35 CENTS

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EVERY STORY NEW!

VOL. 10, NO. 4 **MANHUNT** AUGUST 1962

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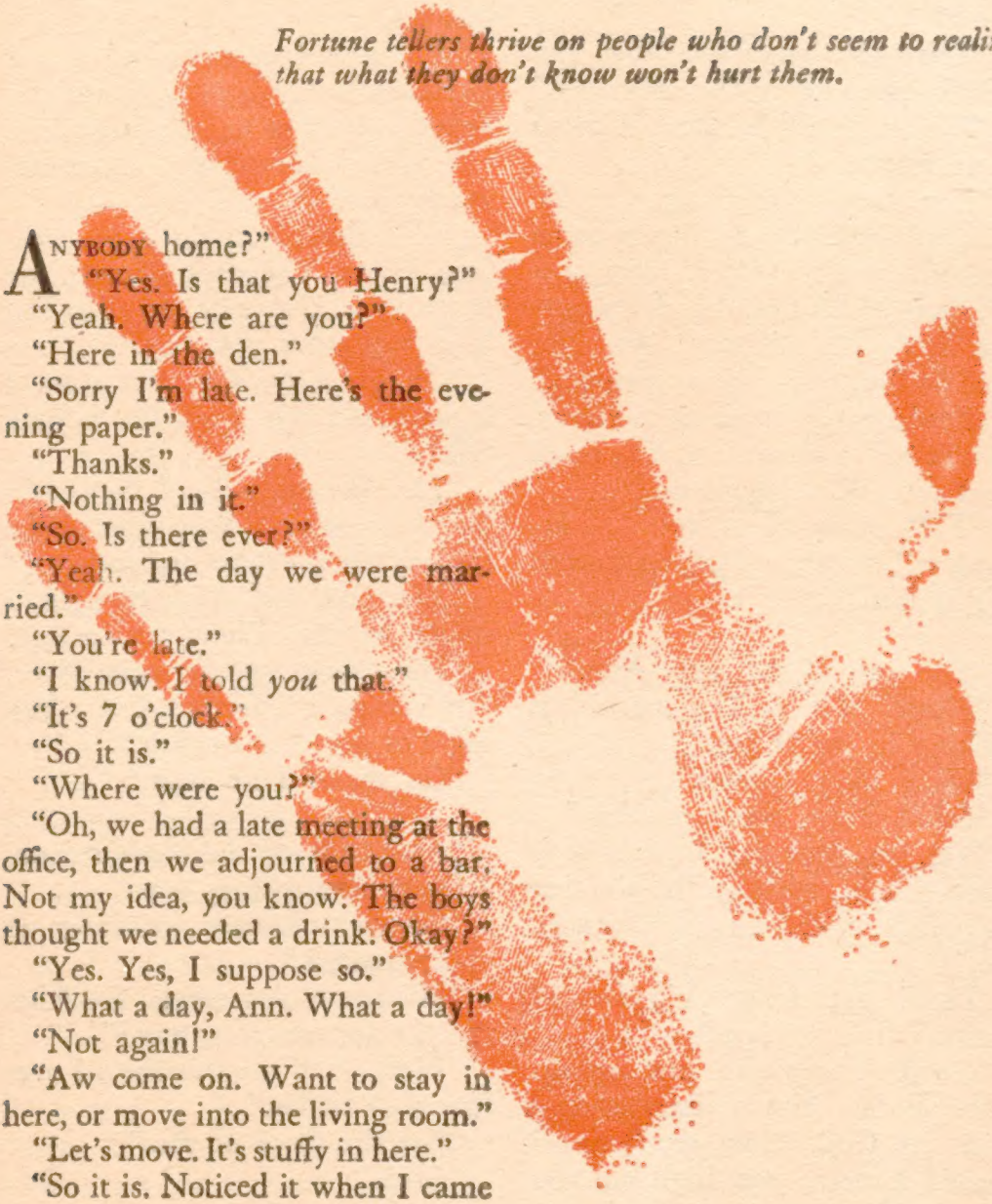
MANHUNT VOLUME 10, NUMBER 4, August 1962. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, $4.00 or 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $5.00 (in U.S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1962 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

lifeline

BY JOHN CONNER

Fortune tellers thrive on people who don't seem to realize that what they don't know won't hurt them.



ANYBODY home?"

"Yes. Is that you Henry?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

"Here in the den."

"Sorry I'm late. Here's the evening paper."

"Thanks."

"Nothing in it."

"So. Is there ever?"

"Yeah. The day we were married."

"You're late."

"I know. I told *you* that."

"It's 7 o'clock."

"So it is."

"Where were you?"

"Oh, we had a late meeting at the office, then we adjourned to a bar. Not my idea, you know. The boys thought we needed a drink. Okay?"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

"What a day, Ann. What a day!"

"Not again!"

"Aw come on. Want to stay in here, or move into the living room."

"Let's move. It's stuffy in here."

"So it is. Noticed it when I came in."

"Thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it. Boy, what a day, Ann. That moron, Jim Hawkins. The All-American boor."

"Bore."

"Boor and bore. Boorish bore."

"What's he done now? Fired you?"

"You know better than that. But he's fixing to get in the right spot."

"Well, wait till he does. Where's those martinis?"

"Yep. Better get going. Get the picture: tired husband comes home pooped from the office. Does anyone listen to his troubles? Does anyone fetch his slippers? No. Not even do they fetch him a martooni."

"You're really breaking my heart. You've had a tough day. You're all tired out. What about me?"

"Well, what about you . . . no, don't tell me until I get back from the kitchen."

"The guts of that guy, Ann."

"Please, Henry. The martini is sticking in my throat."

"Okay, okay. Cheers."

"Salud. Now, about *my* day."

"Yes, yes, your day. It must have been rough, what with all that shopping, and the hairdressers, too."

"Don't get smart, big boy. I couldn't find a thing."

"Good. That's the first upbeat news all day. Almost like getting a raise, by God. How much am I ahead? I mean, how high did you shoot without getting a fit?"

"I'll throw you a fit."

"Go ahead. But tell me about the hairdressers, first. I can hardly wait."

"How does it look?"

"Should it look different? I always thought you were after maintenance."

"Sourpuss. I never looked worse! Gretchen was out of sorts and I'll never go back to her. Perfectly horrid when I complained about my permanent."

"Why don't you do it yourself. You know. The do-it-yourself age is upon us. Get with it? You can keep half what you save."

"Oh generous you. But wait. I haven't told you about the fortune tellers!"

"The fortune tellers? Now I've heard everything. You went to the fortune tellers in this day and age?"

"Yes. Jane and Amy thought it might be fun. There was a . . ."

"How about another martini before you go any further. I've a feeling I'm going to need it."

"Go ahead. I can wait."

"Ah-h, fills up the blood stream. I can take anything now."

"Glutton. Always thinking of your stomach."

"My heart, you mean. So, what did the fortune-teller cost?"

"Well, of all the skin-flints I ever knew! A dollar."

"For the three of you."

"Each."

"And you paid."

"Well . . ."

"Never mind, go on. So you went to the Swami's. By the way, where *do* you find one these days?"

"At the Beverly Hills."

"Of course. Nothing closer than that to Burbank? A cool twenty miles and you drove. Yes. You drove."

"All forty miles! I said it was a rough day, didn't I?"

"Go on. So you and Amy and Jane wanted to find out what dark, tall and handsome stranger was going to change the courses of your lives. I hope."

"*You* hope."

"Yes, I hope."

"Well, we simply decided we needed a drink and Jane suggested the Swami along with it."

"You'll go far to find a combination like that!"

"Yes, you will. Name one other."

"Go on, I'm on pins and needles."

"Well, we found him in the Green Room, and it was awful. Amy went first and she looked frightened and pale as the man in the turban shook his head slowly and refused to say anything."

"For a buck he wouldn't say anything?"

"Oh the usual. Who she is married to. What she likes to eat . . ."

"And how much . . ."

"Shuddup. And all about the past. Things we already knew."

"But nothing about the future? Now I'm getting worried."

"Wait. I came next. And, Henry, you know how long, straight and deep my lifeline has always been."

"Well, not deep. Long, I suppose. Yes. Long."

"Live to be a hundred years, they've always said."

"Brrrrr!"

"Well, it's gone."

"What's gone?"

"My lifeline, stupid. Don't you ever listen?"

"Yes. If there's any reason. Any reason at all."

"Look. See? My lifeline, there's only half left. The rest of it is a mess of teeny weeny wrinkles. Smashed. Gone. All Gone!"

"Wow. Let's see."

"Look, nothing but wrinkles here above the base of my thumb."

"Didn't you ask about that? You should have explained about your lifeline."

"I did."

"And he said nothing?"

"Nothing about me, Henry. Only that he and all the swami's are going out of business."

"They are? They should."

"Everyone has the same kind of lifelines these days."

"He said that?"

"Yes. He was actually surprised we hadn't heard. It's a national condition."

"Now let me get it straight, Ann. He says there's no future . . . for anyone?"

"Yes."

"Phew! D'you suppose there's time for another drink?"

"Oh, don't be funny, Henry."

"Another drink? One for the road?"

"Yes. And while you're doing that I'll get the news in the den."

"Henry, Henry, come quick!"

"Now, what's the matter, Ann?"

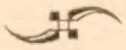
"Listen!"

"Well, turn it up."

"I can't, it's suddenly gone off."

"What did it say, Ann, for Pete's sake?"

"Conelrad, it said, and added this is no test."



STATEMENT

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1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Michael St. John, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, John Underwood, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Managing editor, J. Proske, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N.Y.; Business manager, B. Wadsworth, 545 Fifth Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

2. The owner is: Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

3. The known stockholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of stock are: Michael St. John, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Gertrude-Faye St. John, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Leo Mayer, 545 5th Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

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The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: 66,584.

MICHAEL ST. JOHN
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1961.

[SEAL] DAVID A. FERDINAND,
Notary Public

(My commission expires March 30, 1962)

HEROES ARE MADE

Ability, courage and determination are the ingredients from which heros are made. Then of course there's an instant variety called, "the fix."

BY BEN MAHNKE

Big Roy Harrison was beat. His chin brushed against the black stubble on his chest as he slumped forward on the bench and stared at the scratches on his arms and then down at his right ankle. It was beginning to swell and he gently reached down and probed his finger over the swollen area. The pain made him wince and he jerked his hand away quickly.

He did not notice the sudden sound that echoed from the shower room when the hot water began to strike the cold floor. He was thinking about his aunt and uncle. He knew they had watched the game on television and he wondered how his aunt was reacting to the defeat. He wondered how many people in Farrisville Harbor were happy that his team had lost. That Johnny Farris' team had won. He could imagine what Johnny was doing. He could picture Johnny across the hall in the other locker room mod-

estly accepting the congratulations from the Western State followers. The thought made him swear under his breath.

Roy thought of what the papers would say. Something like, "With the score tied and with ten seconds remaining, Harrison tried a jump shot from the foul line. It rolled off the rim and Farris rebounded for State and immediately called a time-out. When time was back in again, State brought the ball down and with only five seconds showing on the board, Farris shook loose and fired home the winning basket over the outstretched hands of Harrison. Thus ended the dreams of the 'Cinderella Boys' from Southern Tech. Chalk up another championship for those perennial giants, Western State."

They probably won't even say that I led both teams in scoring and rebounding Roy thought. He cracked the knuckles of his hands and squared his shoulders. He had to get out of that locker room. He needed air, maybe even a drink. After all, it won't hurt anything now, the season is over.

Roy stood up and limped into the shower. The hot water felt good. He let it hit him in the chest and he had to fight off the urge to lean against the wall and let the water pound away at him endlessly. But he realized that it would just be a feeble attempt to wash the defeat away. He forced himself to move aside and let another player take his place. He toweled off haphazardly and dressed quickly. He pushed his hair back with one swipe of his hands and walked out.

The corridor was crowded and it was easy to see who was waiting for who. The State people smiled and laughed as they talked while the others, the Tech crowd, just stood around and talked quietly amongst themselves. Roy examined the many faces quickly and felt relieved when he didn't spot anybody from Farrisville Harbor. He knew where some of them would be though.

"Roy," a voice called out as he began to move through the people.

"Over here, Roy."

He turned and saw Coach Rigo motioning to him. He wished that he had ignored the call but he limped over and accepted the outstretched hand.

"How's the ankle?"

"It will be okay, Coach."

"Son, this reporter wants to ask you a couple of questions," Coach Rigo said as he nodded towards the man standing next to him.

"You played a nice game," the reporter said.

"Thanks," Roy answered.

"I just want to get a few things straight. You and Farris are from the same town and you played together in high school, in fact, you two led your team to the state championship, right?"

Roy nodded. "I thought so," the reporter said. "But is it true that

you also had a scholarship to Western State, and you turned it down?"

"Yes, they offered me a scholarship."

"Why didn't you accept it?"

"Because we gave him more money," Coach Rigo joked.

Roy saw the worried look on Coach Rigos' face and he hesitated a moment before he answered. "Well, there were a couple of reasons," Roy began. "One was the fact that I didn't want to go to a college so close to home. Another reason was the fact that I wasn't too sure that I could make the team."

The reporter frowned at the answer. Roy had been considered the better of the two in high school. In fact, he had been voted the best player in the state tournament. Roy wondered what the reporter would have said if he had said, "The people at Western State thought I was an academic risk. They wanted me to come to school on my own for a semester to see if I could make the grade." And even that wouldn't have been the real reason that he hadn't gone there. Even though he had bluntly told them what they could do with their school.

Coach Rigo was relieved when the reporter said, "Well, that's all I wanted to know. Incidentally, I voted for you as the most valuable player, but you know how that goes, it's usually a player from the winning team that gets the award."

"Thanks for your vote, but I guess Johnny deserves the honor." Coach Rigo smiled when Roy answered. And they both knew why. Neither of them had forgotten the bad situation Roy's frank answers had created earlier in the season. Southern Tech had soundly beaten a team and when a reporter traveling with the other team had asked Roy for his opinion of that team, Roy had bluntly answered, "I played against better teams in high school."

Roy had been shocked when he saw the headlines in the paper the next day. "HARRISON SAYS WE COULDN'T BEAT A HIGH SCHOOL TEAM." From then on all interviews with Roy were cleared through Coach Rigo until he had become satisfied that Roy had finally learned to use "good taste." "You're too hard, Roy, act gracious towards the losers," Coach Rigo had said.

Roy turned to leave and Coach Rigo asked, "You're going over to congratulate that Farris boy and the other Western players, aren't you?"

Roy nodded and Coach Rigo continued, "I know how you feel, son, but just remember, you have another year left, we'll be back."

As Roy limped away towards the other dressing room he heard Coach Rigo tell the reporter, "It's character kids like Harrison have that keep me coaching."

As Roy entered the locker room he was knocked off balance by a State player who kept raising his clenched fists and roaring, "Yea

State." Roy leaned heavily on his swollen right ankle and shook his head in disgust at the player. "The guy probably never even got in the game," Roy thought.

He stood by the door and tried to spot Johnny. But it was Johnny, still accepting congratulations, who saw Roy first. Johnny excused himself graciously from the throng and pushed his way through the crowd. Roy watched enviously as Johnny acknowledged the back slaps and calls of, "Nice game, Johnny."

The room suddenly became quiet when everyone realized that Roy was in the room. The reporters jostled each other as they surrounded them. Roy extended his hand and said, "I just came over to offer my congratulations."

A flashbulb flashed and a voice called, "Hold that pose." Roy forced a smile as the flashes exploded in his face.

"I appreciate your coming over," Johnny said, Their conversation was cut short when the reporters began to ask questions.

"How did you feel when Farris scored the winning bucket?"

"I felt like I was five-two instead of six-eight," Roy replied.

"Is Harrison the best player you've faced this year?"

"Roy's the best player I've faced in any year," Johnny answered.

"Yes, we played together in high school."

"Yes, Roy and I have been friends all of our lives."

"Did you think you were going to win the 'Most Valuable Player' award?"

Johnny smiled at Roy and said, "No, I thought Roy would get it since he was the leading scorer and rebounder."

The reporters paused for a moment and Johnny told Roy, "You were really great out there tonight."

Roy shrugged his shoulders and said, "The right man got the award." He cursed himself for saying that. He really wanted to say, "Ya, I was great, give me the trophy." But he fought off the bitterness and smiled at Johnny.

When the reporters were through questioning them Roy said, "Well, I better get going, I don't want to break up the victory celebration."

"Okay, Roy," Johnny said. "Say, are you coming home this summer or are you going to stay down at school again? Maybe we can get together if you come home, you know, the old gang stuff."

"No, I'll have to stay down at school. I'm behind my class in school again so I'll have to go to summer school to catch up."

"I know what you mean, it's tough trying to play ball and keep up with school. But if you do get home, give me a call, okay?"

"I will," Roy said as he shook hands again and walked towards the door. He nodded at a man who called, "You played a nice game, Harrison."

Roy stood outside the locker

room door. He knew that Mr. Farris and Mary Ann would be waiting for Johnny in the main lobby. He knew that he should at least say hello. It was the right thing to do but he couldn't force himself to go up there. Instead, he limped down the corridor and slipped out the side entrance.

The cool wind that greeted him as he walked out into the night stung his face and he pulled the collar of his overcoat up around his neck for protection. The huge buildings that threatened to engulf the arena loomed up into the darkness and Roy was surprised at the quietness of the street. The same street that had been jammed with people only two hours before.

Roy began to limp towards the nearest corner. He turned down the side street and kept walking. Ahead of him he could see neon signs flashing on and off the entrances of bars that dotted the street.

Roy felt like drinking. He limped along slowly, cursing his fear of seeing Mr. Farris. He knew he would see him sooner or later and have to endure his smug arrogance. And Mary Ann, it had been over a year since he had seen her. Since the last time he was home.

He wondered how she was. How she liked being the future Mrs. Johnny Farris. He wondered if she realized that Mr. Farris looked on her as just another possession in the Farris family. Did either of them know the real Mr. Farris? Roy shugged his shoulders, it was none of his concern, not anymore. Roy walked past a bar and didn't bother to look in. He felt like walking some more. The air felt good now that he had become adjusted to its bite. He wondered if he had done the right thing and then he began to laugh. "Mr. John Farris," he called out.

Roy laughed harder. "Mr. John Farris," he yelled again and suddenly became aware of his voice. He looked around and felt relieved that nobody was around to hear him. He cursed at his own anger.

"That poor, sick man," Roy thought. He could visualize him standing in the main lobby of the arena. His coat open and his hands resting on his hips as he stood with his legs wide apart and chewed on his cigar. Roy knew how much Mr. Farris enjoyed showing his success and Roy laughed bitterly as he thought of him being pointed out as the father of Johnny Farris.

Roy clenched his teeth and vowed that he would never again humble himself to that man.

The sound of music drifted out into the night as Roy walked past another bar. He turned and looked up at the sight. This was the place where they would meet. "Eddie's Bar." Roy looked up and down the street and quickly turned his back on a passing cab. He waited until the cab had turned the corner before he entered.

The warm, smoked filled interior

of the bar burned his eyes and he could immediately smell the sickening, sweet scent of the latrine antiseptic. He exchanged glances with the few customers who turned to look at him before he sat down on the end stool.

"Give me a beer, I guess," he told the approaching bartender as he fumbled in his pocket for change. Roy drank his beer slowly and watched the couple at the back table through the mirror. They were talking intensely and he wondered why they kept dropping dimes in the juke box. The music drowned out the dialogue of the movie that was playing on the television set.

Roy slowly drank his bottle of beer. He did not hear the door open and the hand that brushed across his shoulder startled him and he bumped his ankle against the runner of his stool as he turned quickly. He grimaced from the pain as he looked at the short man who sat down next to him.

"Hello, Roy, been waiting long?"

"No, just got here. Didn't expect you so soon."

"The kids went down to some club for a victory celebration and I told them that I would see them later. Besides, I knew how hungry you would be."

The bartender came down the bar and stood in front of them. "Beer?" he asked.

"No, give me scotch and water, might as well make that two," Mr. Farris said.

"Not me, I'll have another beer," Roy ordered.

The bartender waited as Roy and Mr. Farris exchanged glances.

"Well, make up your minds." Roy watched as a startled expression came over Mr. Farris' face. He wasn't accustomed to being ordered and he stared back hard at the bartender. Roy saw the mean look come into the bartenders face and he suddenly noticed how rugged the man looked. He didn't try to hide the smirk on his face when Mr. Farris said meekly, "One beer and one scotch and water."

"What are you laughing at?" Mr. Farris asked angrily.

"At you, that bartender must not know who you are. He doesn't know how important you are."

Roy watched the blood rush into Mr. Farris' face and saw him clench and open his fist. The look in his face was designed to frighten but Roy only laughed sarcastically. "You know I never realized it before, but you're a little man."

"Don't you talk—"

"Skip it," Roy frowned, "give me my money."

"What if—" Farris stopped talking as the bartender put the drinks on the bar in front of them. Farris pretended that he didn't notice the bartender until the man said, "Eighty-five cents."

Mr. Farris quickly reached inside his coat and drew out his wallet. He threw a dollar bill on the bar and snarled, "Keep the change."

The bartender stared angrily at Farris and then looked at Roy. His eyes sought some kind of an answer and Roy could only smile and shrug his shoulders. He was enjoying it and he could feel a pair of eyes burining into his side. The bartender looked at Farris again for a moment and then walked away.

"What if you what?" Roy asked.

"What if I don't pay you, what could you do?"

Roy stood up slowly and stared down at Mr. Farris. "You know, I don't think I could do anything, except maybe I'd come home this summer and take Mary Ann away from Johnny. How would you like that, Roy Harrison, the boy from across the tracks taking Johnny Farris' girl away from him. Or did you ever think about next year. You know that State is on our schedule, don't you? How would it look if I ate your kid up. If I showed him up, and you know I can do it, don't you?"

They sat quietly sipping on their drinks and staring at each other in the mirror. For the first time in his life Roy felt superior to this man. Success, wealth, heritage, all of these were his, but yet he had so little. If he only knew the truth.

After a few minutes, Mr. Farris reached in his side pocket and brought out an envelope. He held it in his lap and began to open the seal. "I trust you, you don't have to count it," Roy said. Mr. Farris slid the envelope over into Roy's hand and he stuck it into his pants pocket.

"You got any idea how much you've paid me in the last few years?" Roy asked.

"Almost five thousand dollars."

"Why," Roy asked, "is it worth all that to you to make Johnny a big man?"

'Johnny will follow in the footsteps of his father as I followed my father. I know that family tradition is something that doesn't make sense to you, but . . ."

"Careful," Roy warned. The bitter feeling that he had forced from his mind years ago flashed back. His parents had been killed in an auto accident and his aunt and uncle had taken him in. Roy had never forgotten the hardship he had caused them. His uncle had never let him. Even now, Roy only admitted the existence of his aunt.

Mr. Farris finished his drink and motioned for the bartender to bring two more drinks even though Roy had hardly touched his bottle of beer. He laid another bill on the bar and turned towards Roy. "You get a kick out of this, don't you? You like it when I pay you off. But did you ever think how greedy you are? I want my boy to have success and you want money."

Roy nodded. He was greedy for money. He hated Farris for making it so clear. He wasn't any better than Farris, wasn't even as good.

Roy changed the subject quickly. "When are Mary Ann and Johnny going to get married?"

"This summer, I suppose," Farris answered.

"You're sure of her, aren't you? She'll make a good addition to the Farris family, won't she?" Roy snarled.

"Mary Ann is a fine young woman, much too good for you, but just right for Johnny."

Roy emptied his glass and poured it full again. He thought about their last transaction. "I'll give you five-hundred dollars if you stay away from her, break it off between you two," Mr. Farris had said. What he didn't know was that Mary Ann had done the breaking off. She had dropped Roy. "You're too hard, Roy," she had said. "You could be a nice guy, but you're ruthless."

She had been right. Hard, bitter, ruthless, Roy knew he was all of these and maybe more. He swore to himself and put the glass up to his mouth and drank it empty.

"What would you say if I told you that I would have gone to Southern Tech even if you hadn't given me the money to go away?"

Farris frowned and listened as Roy continued. "What if I told you that I tried to win that game tonight, that I didn't let Johnny score that last basket, that I couldn't stop him."

Farris looked startled as he replayed the game in his mind. Roy let him wonder for a moment longer before he said, "I could have knocked that last shot right down his throat."

Roy watched the blood rush to Farris' face again, he saw the veins in his neck bulge in anger. Roy took delight in the man's anger.

"I know your capabilities, Harrison. It's not necessary to brag," Mr. Farris snarled back.

Roy laughed and nodded in agreement. He filled his glass again and stared at the foam that threatened to run over the top. There was so much he wanted to tell this man. "Did Johnny tell you that I talked to him after the game?"

"Yes, that was a good move. Johnny said that you looked very dejected. I give you credit, Harrison, you play your part well."

Roy nodded and drank a mouthful of beer. He looked at the clock above the bar. He motioned towards the clock with his head and said, "Don't you think you better get going, they'll be wondering where you are. After all, a father should share his son's success, shouldn't he?"

Mr. Farris looked at the clock and turned towards Roy as he started to slip off the stool. He stared into Roy's face for a long moment. "I'll send you your usual amount for this summer. And when you come up to State next winter, I'll contact you. You realize of course that that will probably be the last time we will do business together."

Roy had never thought of it. The thought sent a cold feeling up his back. "Well, all good things have to end, I suppose. You've been like a

father to me, Mr. Farris." Roy extended his hand and smiled. "We're nothing but a couple of phonies, aren't we?"

Mr. Farris stood next to Roy and buttoned his coat. His lips quivered but the words didn't come. They didn't have to, Roy had said enough. Roy watched him walk out the door and then turned back to the bar. "Bartender," he called. He put the glass up to his mouth and drained it in two gulps. Then he slammed the glass down on the bar and swore, "Damn that Johnny Farris."

BLACKMAIL, Inc.

BY MICHEL DEDINA

By messenger - Private and Confidential

Roger Mermoz
Attorney at Law
16 Rue de Passy
Paris XVI

Paris, April 21

Mrs. Henry Law
3 East 72nd Street
New York City

Dear Mrs. Law:

Enclosed are photostatic copies of a hand-written document which has come into the possession of my client. We feel certain that you will be interested in the document and the continuation of this letter affixed at the end.

The way it began was crazy. I was dreaming that the asylum assembly bell had rung. It was the first day since my release from the lockup block; I wanted to prove myself worthy of the trust Doctor Nailloux had in me, but the girls from the women's block . . . they kept on shouting at me from the high window of their recreation room, "You murdered your wife!" I had to find the assembly hall, I wanted the doctor to see that I could live like a normal man. It was part of my plan of least resistance for leaving the asylum. The bell continued to ring.

I woke up—it was the telephone. The girl lying next to me was still, her head and arms under the blanket. I got out of bed, groggy with sleep. I had trouble locating the ringing telephone, I wasn't used to Rita's apartment. I knocked a moroccan table over.

Who was calling? Perhaps it was Rita, to say she hoped Francoise was satisfactory. I looked under our pile of clothes: no telephone. The bell jangled incessantly.

My foot kicked the telephone, it was next to Francoise's side of the bed. I wondered how anyone could sleep so soundly. The ringing was piercing. I picked up the receiver, the reverberation stopped. I switched the bedside lamp on. Light flooded the room, blinded me for an instant.

"Hello," I said.

There was no reply.

"Rita! Is that you, Baby?" I asked.

Silence.

"Rita!" I shouted, "Is that you? Who is this please? Who's calling? Do you know what time it is?" I looked at my watch. It was six a.m. "It's six o'clock in the morn . . ." Horror assailed my mind. In my hand I held a long kitchen knife. Suddenly a dial tone burred.

I set the receiver down. What was that on the stainless steel blade? Was it rust? I wondered again how Francoise could sleep through all the noise. I pulled the blankets back, but she was never going to wake again. Her throat had been sliced from ear to ear. I felt sick.

The day before, on the train ride from the asylum, I had looked forward to my date with Rita; the only one among my friends and relatives who had written to me at the sanctuary. In her last letter she promised she'd be waiting for me, that she would make up for the four years I had spent in the madhouse. That's why I was surprised to see another girl in her place. She had told me her name was Francoise and that Rita asked her to entertain me. Now she was dead.

The odor of an operating theater filled the room. I opened a window then dressed. I wiped every trace of finger prints off the knife. Then I went over the apartment carefully, wiping, polishing everything I had touched, or might possibly have touched. I couldn't afford to take a chance, one slip and I'd be sur-

rounded by walls. This time for life.

* * *

I walked slowly through awakening Paris. I thought about the murdered girl. How was she killed? Doctor Nailloux said I often walked in my sleep. Perhaps Rita deceived me into staying at her apartment to have a patsy for the murder.

Rita worked as a model at Jolin's, one of the smaller fashion houses on the Avenue Matignon. I ran up the back stairs to the work rooms, as I had done so many times before. The main work room was full of girls sewing, cutting . . . I asked one of them, a fitter, when Rita would be in.

"Haven't you heard?" she asked.

"Heard what?"

"She quit."

"When?"

"About two months ago. Her cousin Carole took over her job."

It was too early for any of the models or the sales girls to be in yet. She gave me Carole's home address.

* * *

Carole lived in a building facing the Gare de Lyon, with an elevator that was so old I thought it would never make it to the top floor. A girl in a light dressing-gown answered my knock. I thought for a moment that she recognized me.

"You're Rita van Campen's cousin?"

"I am," she smiled and opened the door wider. "Won't you come in?"

"I'm Frank Lorris, I wonder if you could help me find her," I said, following her into the living room.

"She's gone out of town."

"Back to Holland?" Rita was Dutch.

"No, I don't think so. My father told me her doctor advised her to get away from the city . . . Papa asked me to fill in for her while she's away. As a matter of fact I never met Rita, my side of the family isn't terribly close to her's."

"Did your father say she's staying with a friend?"

She sat down, looked at me, "Do you know Rita well?"

"Very well, Carole."

"She has a new friend, if you see what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"My father told me it's Jean-Claude Attaque."

"Attaque!"

"Do you know him?"

"I did a story on Jean-Claude when I was with *Paris-Soir*." I didn't tell her that Attaque had beaten and almost killed an old prostitute. "But I had to kill the story."

"The Attaques are very rich. I read they had a chateau built out at Bois d'Arcy."

"Guess I'll go pay him a visit."

"Do you have a car?"

"No."

"You can borrow mine." She gave me a set of keys. "It's the black

Simca convertible in front of the house. Bring it back to Jolin's. I'll be going to work soon."

I found the car and headed for the highway that leads to Bois d'Arcy. When I reached the small town I stopped at an old-fashioned garage, ostensibly to fill up the tank, but actually to ask my way to the Attaque chateau.

"You don't want to visit that place," the attendant said, "It isn't really a chateau, they've just had it built."

When he finished I drove towords the big hospital-looking building. Old man Attaque was making a mint selling jet fighters to the NATO countries, but he was a bit eccentric, he thought his competitors wanted to kill him. There was a guard patrolling the fence and a guard at the gate.

I showed my press card at the ornate gate. An Indo-Chinese butler waited as I got out of the Simca.

"Monsieur Attaque is not in, Monsieur. What is your name?"

"Lorris, I want to see Jean-Claude."

"Monsieur Jean-Claude isn't seeing anyone, he isn't well this morning."

In other words Jean-Claude had a hang-over.

"Tell him it's about Rita."

The butler asked me to wait in a glassed patio that was furnished in Scandinavian modern. There was a television set, I turned it on, but the programs hadn't started yet.

"Monsieur Jean-Claude will see you now," the butler had returned. I followed him up the white marble stairs to a large bedroom.

* * *

"What do you want?" asked a voice under the blankets.

"To talk about Rita."

"So?" he pushed the blankets back. The face that appeared belonged to a temperance society poster.

"Do you know where she is?"

"No, she took money off me and that's the last I heard from her."

"How much?"

He put his hands to his head, "I don't know, it was a lot."

"How much?" I grabbed his pyjama jacket and shook his head.

"I don't remember, I handle a lot of money."

Maybe he was telling the truth.

The motion was too much for him. He jumped out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom, I heard the sound of vomiting. Then he came back and poured himself a whisky.

"You still here?" he asked. He looked ghastly.

"Yea," I watched him drop into a chair. "Do you know a girl called Francoise?"

"I know a lot of girls called Francoise."

I described the murdered girl.

"No, I never met her," he finally said.

"When's the last time you saw Rita?"

"I haven't seen her since last week. Then she called me a couple of days ago. You know, she wanted to see me, but I told her I couldn't."

"Why not, Attaque?"

"I can't afford to be seen with her. If I get into any more trouble my father will cut me off."

"What does Rita have on you?"

"That's none of your business."

I grabbed his shoulder, "Maybe it is my business, maybe you'd better start giving me the right answers."

Jean-Claude screamed, "Alright. Don't shake me again. I'll tell you what you want to know."

I let him go. "That's better."

"Before I start, there's something I have to show you," he moved to the door, "I'll be right back."

He left the room and I picked up a magazine from the table.

Jean-Claude was gone a long time and I started flipping through the pages, reading the advertisements. One featured a girl in a bikini . . . *She kicked me behind the ear. I yelled. . . .*

* * *

My head felt as if it had been used as the business end of a battering ram. I cursed myself for having been stupid enough to let him leave the room. Obviously he must have called that guard and butler. I was lying on the seat of Carole's car parked in some sort of wood. The sun had set. I sat up, backed the car into a country lane and drove down until I heard the sound of the highway. I headed back to Paris.

The rush hour was on when I arrived at the Champs Elysees. I had to stop for a light at the corner of the Avenue George V, I called the newsvendor over and bought the late evening editions of *Le Monde* and *France-Soir*. When I turned into the Avenue Matignon, I saw her waiting for me in front of the fashion house. I climbed out of the car, still dizzy from the beating. I saw her running towards me.

"I thought you'd never come. I was so worried."

The impression that she was feigning concern kindled in me.

"Please get back into the car." I did, she slid in beside me ."Why did you want to find Rita?"

"Do you know what's happened at her apartment?"

"No, Carole," I said it as innocently as I could.

"Haven't you seen today's paper?" She picked up the *France-Soir* on the seat between us and showed it to me. The right hand third of the front page carried a photograph of the blood-smeared corpse I had left in Rita's apartment. They called it a sex killing. The body had been found by the weekly cleaning woman.

The paper carried an interview with Rita at Enghien, quoted her as saying she lent the apartment to Francoise Mery and that she didn't know if Francoise had admitted a stranger to the apartment.

But Rita knew I was coming! Was she covering up for me? Why?

"I don't understand, Carole. What does this have to do with me?"

"All the girls in the work-rooms were talking about you, they all think you had something to do with the murder. The police have been to see me. They asked me who you were and why you wanted to see Rita. I told them I didn't know. I also told them I didn't know your name."

"Thanks."

"Don't you think you owe me an explanation? Did you. . . ?" her voice tripped, ". . . have anything to do with the murder?" She was picking at a small ring on her finger. I placed her hand in mine, her eyes reflected solicitude.

"Please tell me," she said.

"Carole are you sure you want to get involved?"

She nodded her head.

"I spent the night with Francoise."

"Who?"

"The girl who was killed." I told her all I knew about the murder.

"Can you swear you had nothing to do with it?" she pleaded.

"I can't Carole . . . I'd like to. Maybe I killed her in my sleep, I'm not sure. That's why I must find out if there was somebody who hated her enough to kill her. And to do that I have to see Rita, she's my only lead to Francoise's past."

She bit her lips, "I know a good lawyer, he'll help you with the police, and then you can clear this whole mess up."

"I can't do that. I've just been paroled from a mental asylum. I was convicted of killing my wife. If the police knew I was involved . . ."

"You could plead temporary insanity."

I grabbed her arm, "Maybe I killed her but I am not insane."

"You're hurting me," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"Let me help you," she said.

"What!"

"I want to help you."

"Why?"

She smiled, "Maybe I feel sorry for you," she brushed a hair from my jacket, "You shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth."

We sat, without speaking, smoking half a cigarette each. "Alright," I finally said. "First thing I do is find Rita." I started the engine and headed the car into traffic. "I'm going to Enghien, that's where the paper said Rita was. I'll drop you off at home first."

"Please let me go with you Frank."

"If you want to."

She turned the back of her blond head to me. "Frank," she said.

"Yes."

"Did you kill her?"

"I'm not sure . . ."

"I didn't mean Francoise, I meant your wife . . ."

"No, I didn't kill her. She committed suicide only it looked like I did it. She used my gun, my prints were all over it and hers were hardly discernable."

"Why did they. . . ?"

"My lawyer advised me to plead insanity. It was my only chance. He saved my life. Trouble is; after a few years at a nut-farm, you feel you really belong." We became silent. I was grateful I had to drive, it kept me from thinking about the past, about that morining.

She turned towards me and slipped her arm behind me. "You poor darling." She kissed my cheek gently.

We tried four hotels before we hit the right one. I showed the manageress my old press card and asked to see Rita.

"I'm sorry you can't see her. She checked out this afternoon."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"She was frightened of going back to her apartment," the old woman obviously enjoyed gossip.

"Did she tell you where she would be staying?"

"No, she was really upset. The police asked her to return to Paris, they'll want to question her again."

"How did she come to stay at your establishment?"

"I was recommended to her by Doctor Pujet."

"Oh?"

"He's a physical culturalist. He has a gymnasium; he's done wonders for my back."

"Has he? Do you think he might be able to do anything for my leg, it's been giving me a lot of trouble."

I jotted Doctor Pujet's address in a small notebook. As I returned to the car I felt sort of woozy, as on the day after I had my appendix out.

"What's the matter, Frank?"

"Nothing much, Carole," I still wondered at her concern.

* * *

We returned to Paris, drove around the Place de la Republique to the dismal rue Yves Toudic. I got out of the car and went into the old building where Doctor Pujet had his gym. I thought how pleasant it was going to be to find Carole waiting for me.

Short, fat and tallow faced Doctor Pujet offered me a cup of coffee, "It's good for the mind," he said sipping from his cup.

I told him I was looking for Rita.

"I don't blame you, she is a perfectly charming girl, really charming. She has such graceful poses. So light. I wanted to hire her to give free-form dancing lessons, but she came into some money."

"Where did she get this money?"

"She is a charming girl, simply charming." He smiled, "She has many friends, she has such an endearing personality; people give her money just because they like her."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. You have no idea how much she's appreciated. I know one young man offered her twenty-five thousand francs if she would live with him for a month."

"Did she accept?"

"I should think so!"

Rita had stooped to prostitution! I felt sorry for her. "Do you know where I can find her?"

"She isn't going home, but she'll be coming here in the morning, she wants a special massage. Rita has had a very trying time. A friend of her's was murdered in her apartment."

"I read about it in the paper. What time will she be here?"

"At nine," he replied.

"See you in the morning." Returning to the street I had trouble spotting Carole's car. She had found a parking space about half a block away.

"Did he tell you where Rita is?" she asked as I stepped in.

"He doesn't know, but she'll be coming back in the morning; so will I."

On the drive back to Carole's apartment we both became silent again. "Don't worry," she said when we arrived, "Everything will turn out alright." She gave me her beautiful smile. She looked brave but somehow unconvincing. In the elevator she said, "I'll make up the couch in the living-room for you." She took my hand. I forced her body against mine. I felt the full response of her mouth.

I never used that couch.

* * *

Next morning I had trouble starting the car, then I got caught in the traffic jam on the Boulevard du Temple. It was nine-thirty by the time I reached the rue Yves Toudic. Doctor Pujet was sitting in a chair reading a magazine.

"You're late," he said as I came in, "Rita's come and gone."

"Where did she go?"

"To see a girl-friend, or a girl. I'm not sure which."

"Did she make another appointment with you?"

"No, but I'll tell you what, leave me your name and your telephone number and I'll have Rita call you."

I almost gave him Carole's number. But I didn't, the fewer people who knew where I was staying, the better.

I went downstairs. As I was driving away from the curb, I noticed a policeman running towards me, pulling a gun out of his holster.

There were two shots, I slammed the accelerator down hard and took the car around one corner, then another. I looked back; I had lost him.

I drove to the Canal Saint Martin and stopped to buy the morning papers. Luckily for me the newsvendor was blind; luckily, because my picture was on the front page. I jumped back into the car and spread the paper out. The headline read.

POLICE SEEK
MAD SEX KILLER

No wonder the cop had tried to shoot me down. The paper said that I had been traced through the murder knife on which my finger prints had been found!

Yet I distinctly remembered wiping my prints off the knife.

Maybe Rita had finally told the police I stayed at her apartment and they had released the finger-print story as a cover to protect her while I was on the loose.

I put the paper down and rummaged through the glove compartment for sunglasses. I found a small pair.

As I was riding up to Carole's floor I saw her leaning against the door of the elevator.

"I heard the elevator come up," she said accompanying me to the apartment, "She's been here, she wanted to see you."

"Who?"

"Rita."

"How did she know. . . ?"

"She didn't. She came here because she'd heard you were looking for her at Jolins. They told her you came to see me."

"What else did Rita tell you?"

"She knows you didn't do it," her blue eyes became sad, "She seems to like you a lot, she's awfully worried about you."

"Did you tell her I was staying here?"

"She guessed. She saw the couch I made up wasn't used . . . She said you hadn't taken much time getting into my bed."

"And you didn't deny it?"

"No. Are you angry?"

"That was a mistake Carole, she was only fishing."

"I don't think so."

"Did she say when she'd come back?"

"She said she'd try, but she had an appointment at the Quai des Orfevres, they want to question her again. She's afraid they might have her followed."

I showed her the newspaper. "A policeman saw me using your car this morning. I don't think he had time to get the license number, but he must have recognized the make, so I want you to rent a Citroen and while you're out, get me a nice large pair of sunglasses; these are a little small for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Rita. I think she knows something about Francoise that might help me. She's going to have to help me whether she wants to or not."

"Don't say that. I never met Rita before; my father uses her name as if it was a dirty word. She wants to help you Frank. She's really very nice. She guessed from the way I spoke about you that I love you." Her arms wrapped themselves around me. "Don't be angry because I told Rita."

Angry? I could have forgiven her anything.

* * *

When she came back with the Citroen I set out by myself to find Rita. She had a couple of Dutch friends in Montmartre, Bertha and George. They were a sort of husband and wife act; she was a whore, he was a pimp.

I slipped the dark glasses on and drove to the rue Blanche. It was early, but if George hadn't changed, he'd still be haunting the bars, doing what he knew best: drinking beer.

I found him in Mady's Bar. At first he didn't recognize me.

"You're crazy to stay out in the open," he finally said. "The cops'll get you."

"That's the chance I have to take. I want to speak to Rita. Have you seen her?"

He hesitated, "I like you Frank," he said. "You've always been on the right side. I'd like to help you. I can hide you out in the country at my brother's place."

"That wouldn't do any good right now."

"But don't ask me to tell you where Rita is."

"Are you scared of her?"

"No, but she's a friend of Bertha's."

"What about Jean-Claude Attaque?"

"He's rich," George snickered, "I lay awake nights thinking up ways of separating him from his money."

"Rita succeeded . . ."

"So did my wife."

"Yeah. . . ?"

"He likes to whip girls. For the kind of money he pays, he can whip her any day of the week."

"And Rita?"

"He gave her a lot of money," George replied.

"I know that, twenty-five thousand francs."

"What!" He slammed his beer glass onto the bar.

"That's right," I repeated, "Twenty-five thousand."

"The slut . . ."

"What's the matter, did she hold out on you?"

"No, you've got the wrong idea."

"Let's have the truth, George, is Rita hustling for you now?"

"No, she isn't."

"I don't believe you." I wrapped my hand around his adam's apple.

"I swear she isn't. I swear it on my life."

"Why did young Attaque pay her?"

"To live with him for a month," he turned on a sickly smile. I let him go.

"Does he like her?"

"He did then. It's the closest thing to love a nut like Attaque will ever know."

I visualized their happy evenings together; Attaque with his set of whips, or whatever it was he used, and Rita . . .

"You expect me to believe that Rita would be satisfied with the same man every night for a whole month?"

"She did it . . ."

It didn't sound right . . . "How well did you know the dead girl?" I asked.

"I only met her once."

"Did Rita want her removed?"

"I don't know."

"Or Attaque?"

"I don't know a thing."

"Where's your wife?"

"She's still in bed." He gave me the address of the small hotel where they lived and I left him sitting at the bar.

Bertha was making-up her face when I walked into the room. She mistook me for a potential customer. "Come in, Darling." Her Dutch accent wasn't pronounced as Rita's, but she had never quite lost it.

"Hello."

Bertha came forward. I removed the glasses. "It's you!" she gasped. "You have a nerve coming up here. Do you want to get me in trouble with the cops?"

"If I have to."

"What do you want?"

"Rita."

"She's not here. She had to go see the police."

"Has she been sleeping here?"

A smile curled over her lips. "No, she hasn't been staying here, but even if I knew where she was living now, I wouldn't tell you. She thinks you didn't kill Francoise, but I told her to be careful. I know men better than she does, it's the likes of you that kill women that like to hurt . . ."

"Is Rita hustling for George?"

"I bet you'd like to know."

"When I told George that Attaque gave her twenty-five thousand, he almost jumped out of his skin. Why?"

"How should I know?"

"Did Francoise ever hustle?"

"I don't know. I didn't know her very well."

"What can you tell me about her?"

"She and Rita were friends. Francoise was nice to Rita after her month with Attaque."

"Why did she help Rita?"

"She's . . . It's none of your damned business."

"Are you sorry Francoise is dead."

Bertha tried to keep from speaking, but she was a born gossip. "No," she finally said, "I couldn't stand the little creep. She was mean, not like Attaque, she was worse, she got right under your skin and twisted like a ring worm."

"Why did Rita have anything to do with her?"

"Like I said, she needed a friend, somebody to take care of her."

* * *

As I was driving towards the St. Cloud Bridge, I noticed the fuel indicator was close to empty. I pulled into a service station, told the attendant to fill her up, went into the office and asked the woman sitting behind the cash register if I could use her phone. She made me pay in advance, then dialed the number herself, to make sure I wasn't calling a suburban party—trusting soul!

Carole's phone rang for at least thirty seconds before she answered.

"It's me," I said.

"Where are you?" she inquired.

"On my way to see Attaque." The old woman was listening to every word. "Did Rita come again?"

"She called to say she's being followed. They wanted to know if she's helping you."

"Okay, wait for me at home. I'll be back as soon as I can."

* * *

The sun had set when I reached Bois d'Arcy. I parked the car in a small dirt road a couple of hundred yards from the main entrance, threw my jacket in the back seat and removed the jack from the trunk. Going to the furthest corner of the Attaque Estate, I dropped a one thousand franc bill right in the middle of the pathway. It was still light enough to be seen. I stepped behind some bushes and waited. The guard finally came down to my end of the fence. He didn't see the thousand francs, on the contrary he almost kicked it off the path in my direction. But on his return trip he noticed the bill. He bent over—I ran out and brought the jack down with everything I had. The man saw me at the last fraction, but it was too late, he collapsed. I pulled him out of the pathway and stripped him of his jacket, cap and holster. I put them on as quickly as I could. The guard began to stir, I slugged him in the back of the head with his small automatic and walked down to the entrance.

The other guard, in the little gate house, came after me. "Where you going, Bernard?" he inquired.

I continued without turning around. "I'm goin' in, I don't feel good," I mumbled.

"Okay, but don't be too long."

I ran past a garage and stopped in front of an open French window. The Attaque family was seated around a dinner table. I waited for them to finish, each second seemed to take an hour. I wondered how long the guard would remain unconscious.

The man sitting beside Jean-Claude, obviously his father, began haranguing him for wrecking the family sedan. The butler brought liqueurs and poured a stiff jolt of rum for the old man. I inched as close to the house as I could without being seen from inside.

"You frightened me!" A maid, she was young, had bumped into me, she mistook me for one of the guards.

"Ssh." I put my finger to my lips, but she didn't understand. She peered at my face, seeking recognition. She was going to scream. I grabbed her throat and brought her around to hit her. I wished then I had frightened her with the automatic instead. She fell to the ground.

"What's going on?" I looked up and saw Jean-Claude Attaque. "What are you doing here, you're supposed to be guarding the fence? Now get going!"

"Shut up!" I pulled the browning from it's holster and forced him into one of the cars standing in the garage.

"What do you want?" he asked as I started the engine for him.

"You, Ace." I held the gun on him. "Get us out of here." He drove past the guard house. I made him stop in front of the hired Citroen.

"Now I want the truth."

"I don't . . ." he began to say.

I hit him in the mouth. "Don't start lying to me. Did Francoise know what went on while Rita was living with you?"

"Rita must have told her."

"Did she threaten to inform your father?"

"No. I swear she didn't."

"How does Rita fit in? Did you beat her?"

A smile, weak but malacious, flickered on his mouth, "No. You know Rita pretty well."

"Yeah," I said.

"In all the time she was with me, I only touched her once."

"I don't understand."

"I kept her in a house in the country. I only touched her on the first day, then I locked her up. After three days she was begging me."

"Rita earned the twenty-five thousand."

"She didn't do it for the money. She wanted to see if she could spend a month of unqualified abstinence. It was completely voluntary on her part, I only did what she asked."

"Why did you give her the money?"

"She needed it. Call it a loan if you like."

"She'll never be able to pay you back."

"Oh yes she will."

"What do you mean?"

"She's to inherit a lot of money from her aunt in Holland."

"I didn't know that."

"Sure, she won't have any trouble paying me back."

"Why did she need the twenty-five thousand?"

"She has to put on a good front. There's a specification attached to the will. She has to lead a life clean enough to satisfy the executors of the will, the directors of the Benelux Bank here in Paris." I offered him a cigarette. "Of course she's had a lot of trouble," he continued.

"What do you mean?"

"She's pregnant," he grinned. "I know because I sent her to my doctor. There's a very good chance it's my baby."

"That's the first I heard of it."

"She has to appear before the executors at the bank first thing tomorrow morning. If somebody proves she hasn't been leading a moral life, they'll have to defer the estate to a second beneficiary."

"Why did Rita's aunt include all these stipulations?"

"She knew Rita is promiscuous, but she didn't know she's a nymphomaniac. She thought she was doing Rita a big favour; I can't

be too sure though, they're a screwy family. The old girl had a younger brother here in France, she could have left her money to him."

I wondered if Francoise had been blackmailing Rita. "What if she got married?"

"That's been taken into account in the will. If she has a baby, she'll have to be able to prove that conception took place after her wedding. She's three months gone now."

"And the executors have power over her even after the money's been paid?"

"Not quite," Jean-Claude said, "Only a year after tomorrow morning."

"They don't have to know she's pregnant."

"True, but if somebody tells them, they'll have no choice but to recognize the accomplished fact. She can't take that chance.

"Then she has to do something about it."

"That's right. Maybe that's why she needed twenty-five thousand."

"That's a lot of money just for an abortion . . ."

I let Jean-Claude go and returned to Paris.

I got into the elevator and pressed the button. I wanted the snail-paced elevator to leap up. I had held the speedometer on 120-kph on the auto route. I wanted to tell Carole I knew *why* Francoise was killed.

* * *

I rushed into Carole's apartment. I heard the phone drop. She appeared surprised to see me, yet she managed to bring a smile to her lips. "You're back earlier than I expected." Her voice was a bit strained.

I pulled her into my arms. "What's the matter, aren't you glad to see me?"

She gave me a kiss and all of my doubts vanished. I eased her away. "I've got good news for you."

"You have?" She looked like a tired schoolgirl.

"I know why Francoise was killed."

"That's wonderful! Do you know who did it too?"

I wandered to the sofa and took the gun out of my pocket. "I don't know who actually did the murder. It must have been done by a hired assassin, but tomorrow morning when I see the will, I'll know who ordered Francoise's death."

"I don't understand. Here, let me put that gun out of the way."

"Don't bother," I said sticking the automatic in my belt. "Rita is to inherit from her aunt."

"What does that have to do with Francoise?"

"There's a stipulation in the will; Rita has to show the executors she's been leading a moral life. If she can't, the money automatically goes to a second beneficiary."

"But Rita could fight that in court."

"Then the inheritance would be help up for years."

"True." She smiled.

"On the other hand if Rita was dead, then it would be clear sailing for the second beneficiary."

"I still don't see what that has to do with Francoise's murder."

"Carole, suppose you could inherit a fortune by killing one person . . ."

She blushed, "That's absurd, I wouldn't!"

"You didn't, but the number two name on the will didn't feel that way. Number two hired a murderer and told him to kill Rita. He went to Rita's apartment, let himself in, saw me and Francoise sleeping. He knocked us out with ether and sliced her throat."

"But it wasn't Rita!"

"Right. The killer wasn't going to wake her up and ask for identification . . . He went to work . . . then he put the knife in my hand and slipped out . . ."

"Do you think Rita knows?"

"Sure, she knows. Once she heard about the killing, Rita put two and two together and figured out what happened."

"Then she must know who the killer is." Carole blanched.

"That's right, but I figure number two told Rita in no uncertain terms that if she fingers him, or her, to the police, the executors will be told about her promiscuity, and if that happens Rita can kiss her money good-bye."

"Do you think Rita would let you be guillotined just for money?"

"If I'd been caught by the police she might have denounced the killer, as things stand she has everything to gain by sitting still. Don't you agree, Carole?"

"Yes, I guess you're right."

* * *

I lay awake that night. Her beautiful blond head on my shoulder, her eyes closed. I thought about the will. I wanted to forget the whole affair; perhaps settle down and marry again. I put the gun under my plilow and eventually went to sleep.

Next morning clattering cans and a moaning garbage truck woke me. Carole's side of the bed was empty. I jumped up and found a note on the bedside table:

My darling,
I must see my father. Whatever happens, remember I love you.
Carole.

Downstairs I found her car missing. I checked my watch, it was eight-thirty. I bought a paper. There wasn't much in the way of new developments: I was still the only suspect. As I drove in the teeming morning traffic to the Benelux Bank I wondered about the note . . .

"I must see my father . . .
. . . remember I love you
Carole"

Why did she have to see her father?

I parked the Citroen at the pedestrian crossing and went to a cafe across the street from the Benelux Bank. I was going to sit there until Rita showed up.

The first ten minutes or so were uneventful, then a patrolman started looking over the Citroen. He came to the cafe to ask the owner to move it. The one time I wished a cop would give me a ticket instead of trying to be nice. I couldn't risk being recognized.

Going to the rear of the cafe I got some telephone coins from the restroom attendant and called Carole's apartment. There was no reply. I looked out and saw the cop, now drinking coffee at the counter. I couldn't just hang around the rear of the cafe without doing anything. I dialed information, obtained the number of the Benelux Bank, then called and asked if Rita had arrived.

"Yes, sir, she's in conference right now and she can't be disturbed."

I hung up. The cop was still out there. I called Carole's number and let the phone ring until the cop left, then I came out.

I reached the front of the cafe just in time to see a blond leave the bank. It was Bertha. She flagged a cab. I didn't have enough time to call the bank to see if Rita was still there. I figured Bertha had been there to swear to Rita's identity. She stepped inside the taxi and I started the Citroen and followed.

It took a while to get a gist of the taxi's general direction. I followed them to and around the Place de la Republique. When it pulled into the rue Yves Toudic, I knew Bertha had led me to Rita's hide-out.

I drove around the corner and double-parked the car.

* * *

I checked the automatic in the dark hallway and pounded on the door of Pujet's gym. The door eventually opened. "You!" the doctor exclaimed, "Get out of here or I'll call the police." He tried to slam the door in my face. I jammed my foot in it and stuck the automatic under his nose. "I want to see Rita." I pushed the door back and walked in.

"She's not here."

"Don't lie to me. Either she's here now or she'll be coming here soon." I forced him back to the small office where Bertha was waiting.

"Hello Bertha," I said.

She nodded her head weakly.

"What are you doing here?" I inquired.

She tried: "Thought I'd get a rub-down."

"I saw you in the Benelux Bank with Rita this morning."

"Oh . . ."

It was a lie. I hadn't actually seen her with Rita, but it had the desired effect. Bertha collapsed in a chair and began to sob.

I pushed the doctor's face to the wall, picked up the phone and dialed Carole's number. It rang

once, then: "Hello." It was her voice.

"This is Frank."

"Oh darling, I have wonderful news for you. I have to speak to you. Where are you now?"

"I'm waiting for Rita. I'm at Puget's gym."

"Is anybody else with you?"

"Just the doctor and Rita's prostitute friend."

"Let me have the address, I'll be right over."

I told her how to get there, then hung up.

"You're making a fool of yourself," Doctor Pujet said. He turned around. "The police will arrest you. I should have known you were a murderer when you first came here."

I pushed him in a chair and locked them both in the small office. I searched the rest of the gym for Rita. She wasn't in the steam room or in the bathroom.

When I unlocked the door I found Doctor Pujet using the phone. I grabbed it from him. "Hello," I shouted into the receiver, "Who is this?" The only reply was a dial tone. "You never had time. Who were you calling?"

"The police."

"Are you acting as a middleman between Rita and the second beneficiary?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the doctor said.

"And what about you?" I asked Bertha.

"You're crazy," she sobbed, "You're a lunatic. I should have turned you in to the police."

"How about it Bertha, has Rita had her abortion yet?"

"No!" she steeled herself.

"Yes, she's had it," I yelled, "That's why she had to go away for a rest. That's why she couldn't keep her date with me when I was paroled."

"You're crazy," Bertha screeched. "No wonder they locked you up." Her eyes were burning, "You're crazy, crazy!"

I slapped her on the mouth. I had never felt saner in my life. "You gave her the abortion. You must have plenty of experience in your line of work!"

"I didn't," she shouted, "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Was it him?" I asked pointing to Pujet.

"Yes," she whimpered.

"And Francoise knew about it?"

"She was here when he worked on her."

Pujet was hunched up, he was trying to make himself insignificant as possible. I moved close to his face. "Francoise knew Rita had an abortion."

"Yes," he was trembling.

"So did the second beneficiary. You might as well tell me who it is now. I'll get it out of Rita when she comes here anyway."

He began to blubber. I wondered if I had scared him too much.

Then there was a knock on the

door, I ripped the telephone wires out and locked them in the small office. I ran across the gym, praying that it would be Rita. I flung the door open.

"Carole!"

She ran in and threw her arms around me. "Frank," she said kissing me, "Oh darling, I have wonderful news. Here sit down," she led me to a chair. "Frank . . ." she kissed me again.

"Where did you go, Carole?"

"I went to see my father. His business hasn't been doing very well, he needs money badly. I found out who the second beneficiary is yesterday. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I thought perhaps it was father who had Francoise killed by mistake. But I had to ask him for your sake, Frank. He swore he had nothing to do with it."

"Your father is the second beneficiary?"

"No, Frank, not my father, I am."

"You, Carole?"

"Yes," tears were streaming down her cheeks. She took an envelope from her handbag, "I received a copy of the will in the mail yesterday. I wanted to tell you about it, but I didn't dare, I was so afraid my father was involved, that's why I didn't tell you. You're not angry, are you?"

I looked at the will, it was in Dutch, but I recognized Carole's name about half-way through. "No, I'm not angry at you," I said slipping the will in my pocket. "As a matter of fact, I sort of have a confession to make too."

"I don't understand."

"You see, Carole, ever since you started helping me I had a vague feeling you were really with the killers. I know it was wrong. I should have trusted you all the way."

"Oh, Frank," she kissed me, "you poor darling."

"Come on," I said getting up, "I want you to meet Rita's friends."

We went over to the small office, I unlocked the door, "Carole, this is Doctor Pujet and *this* is Bertha," I pointed to the prostitute.

"Bertha!" she exclaimed, "But that's Rita!"

And the cat was out of the bag.

* * *

"I've known both Rita and Bertha for years," I insisted, "And this is Bertha."

"That's the girl who came to my apartment yesterday morning when you were here at the gym. Oh, I think little Carole's been made a fool of."

"We've both been made fools of." I went up to the prostitute. "You went to the bank this morning, not to meet Rita, but to impersonate her." Bertha kept her mouth clamped. "Didn't you?"

She stared past me. "Yes," she finally sighed.

"Is Rita dead?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she answered.

I grabbed Pujet. "Is she dead?"

"No," his eyes were downcast.

"Did you kill Francoise?"

A heavy silence came over the small office. He finally mumbled, "Yes."

"Will you repeat that to the police?"

"Yes, I'm sorry I did it."

"Did you hear him, Carole?"

"Yes, Frank."

"How did you kill Francoise?"

"I stole the key from Rita. I came in while you were asleep. I paralyzed you both with an anesthetic, then I cut her throat—I was wearing gloves. I got your finger prints on the knife and dropped it into a wastepaper basket."

"But I found the knife in my hand . . ."

"That was another knife—I soaked it in blood and put it in your hand. I figured you'd remember to wipe your prints off."

"Why did you kill her?"

"She came here with Rita when she had her abortion. I found out about the inheritance, I thought out the plan while Rita was still unconscious."

"Is Rita dead too?"

He wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve, "No."

"Where is she now?"

"She's in the cellar beneath the gym. It's sound-proof."

I pulled him to his feet. "Show me." He stumbled out of the small office. I shoved Bertha out too. "Coming, Carole?" I asked.

"Yes, darling," she pecked me on the mouth as she went past me.

Pujet pointed to a faintly apparent line cutting across the parquet. "She's underneath this door."

I looked down, there was a ring in the floor. "Pull it open," I ordered him.

"No," he said, wiping his brow again, "I don't dare, she'll attack me if I go down there un-armed."

"Maybe you're right." I pulled the ring and part of the floor swung open, revealing a flight of stone steps. I called Rita's name.

"She's probably asleep," Bertha suggested, "What do you think, Carole?"

"Maybe," she replied disdainfully.

"It's pretty dark down there. Do you have a flashlight, Pujet?" I asked.

"There's one in my desk, I'll get it for you if you like," he offered.

"No," I said, pointing the automatic at him, "You stay here. Carole, you get it."

She ran to the office, we could hear her checking through the drawers. "I've got it," she said coming back.

"Go on down," I said.

"Oh, Frank, I'm scared . . . maybe she's dead."

"Alright, then you keep an eye on these two." I gave her the gun. "The safety catch is off, if they try anything funny, anything at all, aim at their stomachs and squeeze the trigger fast."

As I walked down the stone

steps, Bertha put her hands over her face and began to sob.

I was in a dank windowless room. I played the light along the floor until the beam exposed a stretched out body.

"Rita!" I called. I ran over to her. The sound of my foot-steps mixed with Bertha's sobbing. I knelt down, "Rita?" I turned her head with my hand and shone the light on her face. It was Rita.

She was dead.

I looked at her body. It was wrapped in an old blanket, caked with blood. She had hemorrhaged to death.

I heard scuffling from the gym. I ran across the room and up the stairs, the sobbing had grown louder. I was afraid Pujet had snatched the gun—but he hadn't.

I stuck my head above the floor.

The sound from behind Bertha's hand was reduced to a sputtering. Pujet was smirking.

"Everything alright, Carole?" I asked.

"Everything's under control," she replied pushing her blond hair back. "Only don't call me Carole," she said laughing, "Carole's the girl you spent your first night out of the asylum with, the one who was going to give me, Pujet and Bertha a stinking twenty-five thousand for killing her cousin Rita."

The other two were laughing.

"I don't understand, darling," I moved towards her.

"Get away from me, you stupid creep," she pointed the automatic at my stomach, "You thought you were the great lover, didn't you? You idiot, get back in the cellar. I'm Francoise Mery, the real Francoise." And she slammed the trap-door shut.

My client, Hector Donegal of the Hector Donegal Body Builders Inc., found the bodies of Rita van Campen and Frank Lorris while he was remodelling the gymnasium that once belonged to Doctor Pujet. He had planned to build extra locker rooms in the basement, and to this end unsealed the trap-door.

Mr. Donegal discovered Frank Lorris's statement in a small notebook. It must have been written by the increasingly waning beam of a flashlight.

You will be pleased to know that, acting under Mr. Donegal's orders, I have entrusted the original copy of his document in the hands of another lawyer (whose name need not encumber you) along with explicit instructions for it's remittance to the police in the eventuality Mr. Donegal and myself fail to contact him periodically.

My client decided to take this precaution when he learned that Doctor Pujet and his friends Bertha and George Turrier drowned in a shark fishing accident off the Cornish coast. It must have been heartbreaking for you the only survivor.

You will appreciate that tracing

you has been a burden. One which you would be loathe to let my client bear alone, particularly now that you are the sole recipient of the two million florins, roughly five-hundred thousand dollars, that you meant to share with your three friends.

The private investigators we retained informed us that your name is no longer Francoise Mery, indeed, that you have married into one of New York's best families. We feel you deserve this happiness. That is why we are positive you will want to share your joy by transferring U.S. $25,000.00 (Twenty-five thousand and no cents) to Mr. Donegal's account with the Credit Vaudois in Laussane no later than ten days from today, and that you will repeat this transaction annually, without our having to importune you.

I am very sincerely,

Roger Mermoz.

PROTECT US!

BY DON TOTHE

Every time Timmy got in his way, Frank would yell, "One of these days I'm gonna' kill that kid."

WELL, officer, I just don't know where to start. I mean, how do I go about explaining a thing like this?

At the beginning? What do you mean—at the beginning—the beginning of what?

When did I meet Frank? Let's see. It was about ten years ago. We been married nine years and I knew him about a year when we got married. Yeah—it's about ten years.

I met him at a bar. Now, don't you go getting the wrong idea. He was a nice guy, then. He bought me a drink and we started talking —sociable-like, you know. Just talking, that's all.

Officer, would you mind covering up your gun there. After last night, I get kind of sick whenever I see a gun. Yes, that's right—it sort of brings it all back to me. Thank you. That's much better.

Do things like this happen very often? You know, I'm always reading about stuff like this in the newspapers but I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me.

Yes, all right, I'll get on with my story.

Well, Frank took me home that first night—when we met. He didn't try anything funny, not even a kiss. And he asked me if I would like to go out with him sometime. I liked him right-off so I said, sure. Pretty soon, we were going out every week, and then, twice a week.

He was a lot of fun, then. Always kidding and laughing and joking.

You know the type—always a big, wide grin on his face.

You sure you want me to tell all this? Maybe, it doesn't make any difference, now—after what happened. All right, I'll tell you all I can remember.

Well, we got married and everything was going along just fine. Frank had a regular job and we were happy. I kept working for a while and we saved some money. I stayed on the job until I was about seven months along with Timmy.

At first, when Timmy came, Frank was more like a kid than ever. You should have seen him when he'd come home from work. He used to play around with Timmy for hours. Rolling around on the floor with him. Throwing him up in the air. Tickling him until the boy was nearly sick from laughing. If you ever saw them together, then, you'd never believe anything like this could happen in a million years.

When Timmy was about a year old, though, Frank began to change. He wasn't so happy, anymore. Sometimes, I even thought he was sorry he married me. He started to drink. He'd come home at night and he'd start hitting a bottle before dinner. Then, he got so, sometimes, he wouldn't even come home.

Poor Timmy! Frank got so he would swat him across the face for no reason at all. And he wouldn't have anything to do with the boy, anymore. But Timmy kept following him around—like a puppy dog, you know. In fact, Timmy would pester him until Frank would blow up. And he'd always say, "One of these days I'm gonna kill that kid!"

Of course, he didn't mean it. You know how people say things when they're mad. And Frank really had a temper. He didn't know what he was doing when he flew off the handle.

Things got bad when Frank lost his job. It was last year—during that repression or recession or whatever it was. He looked everywhere and couldn't find any kind of work.

Then, one night, he came home with a big bundle of money. He wouldn't tell me where he got it. He just said not to worry about it, that there was more where that came from.

And I found this gun in his jacket one night. He came home, drunk, and passed out cold. I was undressing him when I found it. I showed it to him when he woke up and he got furious. He said, why did I snoop around in his clothes and he said a lot of mean things.

I tell you, as soon as I seen that gun, I knew it meant trouble.

Yes, sir, he was pretty mean when he was drinking. But when he was sober, he was all right. It was just that rotten booze that made him the way he was.

I never cared too much about myself. But poor Timmy. Frank hardly ever looked at him, anymore. And every time Timmy got in his way, Frank would yell, "One of

these days I'm gonna kill that kid!" And he'd turn to me and say, "I promise you! One of these days I'm gonna kill'm!"

One night, Frank said he was going to shoot both of us. He was real drunk and slobbering all over. Scared the daylights out of me and Timmy. Just because I told him that, maybe, he shouldn't drink so much.

He threw a bottle against the wall and took out his gun. He pointed it at me and he said he was tired of being told what to do. Then he passed out and dropped the gun on the floor.

Well, of course I was scared. I was too scared even to hide the gun from him. Because he was getting so mean. But I still never thought he'd ever go through with anything like the way he said he would. It was just the booze talking.

You know how kids watch television so much. Timmy's like all the rest. He watches that stuff, hour after hour after hour. Especially the Westerns.

Kids are pretty darned smart. They catch onto things fast. Little by little, he figured out what it meant to kill someone. After that, he was afraid of his father.

I always used to tell Frank not to say things like that around the boy. Because Timmy had bad dreams about it.

"I'm gonna kill that kid! I'm gonna kill that kid!" I got sick of hearing it. He said it all the time.

Yes, that's right. Timmy did have nightmares. He'd wake up in the middle of the night and scream like the dickens. I'd run into his room and he'd be sitting up in his bed, his eyes wide open, trembling and crying and saying, "Daddy's going to kill me."

Well, to get down to last night. Frank came home, drunk, and didn't even have any dinner. I had a meat-loaf all ready for him but he went to sleep. Finally, I put Timmy to bed at eight o'clock. I sat up until ten-thirty and Frank didn't wake up so I went to bed.

I don't know exactly what time it was—maybe, around twelve or one. There was this loud explosion.

For a second, I thought I was dreaming. But then when I sat up in bed and opened my eyes, my ears were still ringing.

I was paralyzed. I couldn't move. I smelled something funny—like something was burning.

Then Timmy came into my bedroom. He looked like he was walking in his sleep—dazed, you know. He was carrying Frank's gun. I don't know how he ever got it but he was holding it very steadily with both hands.

He put the gun down on the night stand and he climbed into bed with me. He snuggled up real close and hugged me tight. And he said, "Don't worry, mama." Then, he made me a promise I'll never forget as long as I live—he said, "Daddy won't kill us, anymore."

THERE it was again.

She switched on the bed lamp with its flouncy shade. The clock sat at nine-thirty. Nine-thirty. The phone insistently jangled. She pressed the receiver to her ear.

"It's too early to go to bed," the male voice said.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

A heavy male breathing rasped in her ear.

"Why do you bother me like

The telephone rang. She rose in bed, gripped the receiver, and pressed it to her ear. She listened with disgust, revulsion . . . and anticipation.

this?" she questioned the receiver.

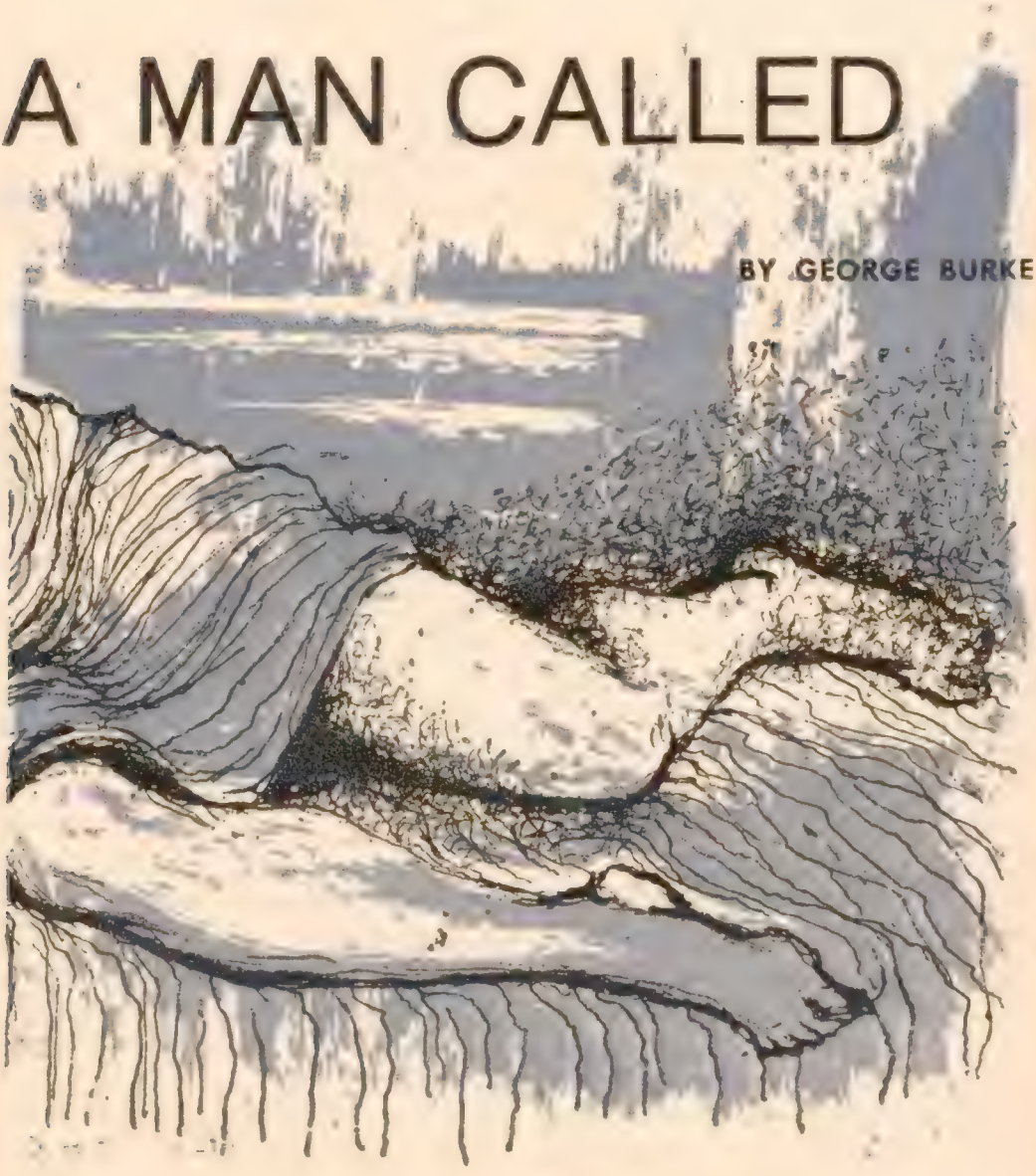
The breathing betrayed the man's presence at the other end of the wire.

"Please—don't call me any more. I don't know you and I have to get my sleep." She listened for an answer. "You always ask if I'm in bed—and then you don't speak. What do you want?"

"I want to sleep with you," the voice said huskily, abruptly.

A MAN CALLED

BY GEORGE BURKE



"No—don't say that," a quick panic shredded her words. "I'm going to hang up—do not call me again."

"You want a man—you'll listen," the huskiness taunted her.

"You're wrong. I don't want to hear about things like that."

"A dame like you—single—with just the right size breasts and a soft tummy."

"Do you know me?" she questioned in alarm.

"I can see you now."

She turned off the lamp and shivered beneath the sheerness of her revealing gown in the ebon darkness.

"You've got nice legs—so white and perfect."

"You're just guessing—no, I know now," she searched for a clue. "You've seen me at work. You're someone just teasing me."

The voice made an obscene comment.

"Please," she begged.

She was ignored as the voice continued suggesting a lewd practice in a filthy language.

"I'm not that kind of a girl," she cried, trying to cradle the phone and then pressing the receiver to her ear until the blood pinched out of her ear lobe.

The male sound went on endlessly, bathing her in lurid descriptions of sexual degradation. Panic ran wantonly through her. Her breath tore at her lungs. The voice went on and on, huskily, jarringly, grinding into her brain. She struggled in herself to scream, but her throat was paralyzed. She could only take the ear piece against the side of her head and moan at the pain. Huskily still, but faster, gaining in momentum and brazeness, the man described her body and its indiscreetness, flooding her in foulness. In the dark—an island lapped upon by scum coated waters—she suddenly quivered in extreme anticipation and then in returning sanity shuddered into a brain-washed torpor. The man's voice lagged, its metallic edge rusting to a dull bluntness.

She found her voice. "Please, don't say any more."

There was a new brightness in the receiver. "See, I knew what kind of a slut you are—you don't fool me—you want it just like I told you—bitch."

Her mind was an abandoned wreck being pounded by the waves of his voice. Tears came to her eyes and spilled over into her throat. "Why did you do this to me?" she wondered plaintively.

A sharp click answered her.

The next night she slippered around the two-room and kitchenette apartment in the dark, checking the single front windows to see if someone in one of the buildings opposite could spy on her. Close in town, her apartment was fronted only by one-story store buildings. Impossible. A man would have to

hang in mid-air to see into her living room. The bedroom, her invaded sanctuary of chintz and flounces, off the living room, was windowless. She took the precaution of hanging a blanket over the shaded and draped front windows before going to bed.

At nine-thirty the phone rang.

She covered her head with the pillow.

The clanging slashed at her with rhythmic lashes.

"I am going to notify the telephone company of these calls," she said sharply into the mouth piece.

The man's voice was gleeful, "In bed so early? What a bed partner you are."

"Where are you—I want that number you're calling from?" she insisted, dragging the phone down on the pillow at her head. "I am going to report you. I will not be annoyed by your filth again."

"How'd you feel today?"

The strangeness of the question stopped her. She had been drained of emotion. Calm and curious. She had wondered why she did not then, as business slowed at the lunch counter, report the trouble on her line to the phone company. Something had ruled her. In its wake, she had concentrated little on herself. It was as though her mind had been washed free of desire and inwardness.

"I was busy—it doesn't matter, I am going to report you tomorrow," she parried with the man.

"You're body looks good—the way you are now," the voice mocked her.

She put a hand to her breast.

"I know you can't see me."

"Don't be smug with me, you whore, I know what you like."

The male sound filled the room, rasping in the ear piece with that persistent indistinctness of a radio tuned down. She placed the instrument on the table and buried her face in her hands. The bee-swarming buzzing droned about her. Almost as if hypnotized, she brought the cool plastic receiver to her ear again, letting the man's foulness sate her limbs. The words, pictorializing man and woman's most intimate relationships, came on in a steady stream. In the long silence, finally, she reached over and depressed the cut-off button of the phone and laid the ear piece on the table.

At ten the next day she called information.

"Is there any way I could trace a call," she asked.

"I'll let you talk to my supervisor," a precise voice said.

"No—miss—I was just wondering—you see, I had a call and I forgot to get the number of the person making the call," she hastened to stop the operator from bringing in somebody higher up. "I wondered if you could check your records?"

"We do not keep such records," the voice said precisely. "If you want your calls monitored, you

would have to talk to my supervisor. I can give you my supervisor now."

She hung up.

The boss asked her that afternoon if she were ill. He wasn't the caller. He was a Chinaman with a thin pinched voice. She passed his question off with a non-committal remark about not sleeping well. She should get a man and not care about sleeping—two in bed lot of fun. Even a Chinaman thought about sex.

She was lying on the cover of the bed, wearing a housecoat, when the phone rang. It was later than usual. Nine-fifty. She listened while the male questioned if she were in bed.

"Listen to me," she begged. "I want to know something about you."

"Why—did you call the cops?"

"No—I didn't report you at all," she said carefully. "Are you tall or short—or maybe medium? What do you look like—your hair, your eyes, anything about you?"

"I'm gettin' to you, ain't I, baby?"

"No—I'm going to hang up—now."

"You won't, you know why, you want to know what I'd do with you in bed right this moment—"

"What—?" she asked, holding the receiver tight to her ear.

She told one of the girls the next day that a man had insulted her on the phone the night before, as though the last call had been the only one. Maybe she could recognize his voice or the way he talks. It might be one of the people that come in the restaurant.

"My boy friend sounds like a bum on the phone," the girl said. "He always shouts—like he's callin' to outer Mongolia or somethin' —embarrassing. He don't shout when I'm with him, you bet."

Well, a guy that would insult people on the phone—he would certainly look different from others. Well, sort of greasy or something.

"What's he want to do, get you to bed with him? That's all they all think of," the girl shrugged. "They got one track minds—starting and ending in the bedroom."

She asked the voice, after his standard opening, brightly, "Did you like the lamb chops today?"

"Baby, maybe I'd better come over and take care of you—you're sick."

"I just wondered—what you had for lunch—to eat," her trick hadn't worked.

"You little slut, you know what I like."

"Please, don't talk like that—not just yet."

"Say—you are getting hep."

"Tell me what you look like—I don't mean your name or anything you don't want to tell me," she strained to hear if he was still there. "Even if you were bald—tell me."

"I got other things to tell you—listen."

A strange fear enveloped her the next day. What if it were some pimply faced juvenile? No. The voice was mature. It could be some ratty faced sneak or a doddering old man. She studied the noon crowd from the surrounding business district. All day she dropped little remarks that might give him —whoever he was—a clue that she was on the make. The married men would get the most flustered, walking out and forgetting their change. The youner ones just gave her some fast lip. She felt ashamed that night and fearful—fearful that the call would not come.

The phone jangled at midnight. She struggled up from sleep and listened lazily as he talked to her. She forgot to be bright or curious, letting him voice his obscenities over and over, taking her mind along devious and forbidden paths.

She waited until the languidness affected them both. "I saw you today—you didn't know—but I knew right away," she lied easily. "You're young like I imagined—and I know now why you talk to me on the phone, you're shyer than people think—it's that—," she groped for an idea to trap the voice. "—you know, that thing on your face."

The click told her the wire was dead.

She was triumphant the next day. She'd made a guess—a shrewd guess that hit close to home. Her joy faded as the lunch hour wore on—almost every man had some kind of a thing on his face. Moustache. Acne. Fever scars. Nicks. Old cuts. None of them seemed subconsciously aware of facial blemishes, either. She could tell her man tonight that she was sorry. She wasn't going to play any more guessing games.

She bathed and read for an hour before going to bed. In a way, tonight was to be special. She wasn't going to play the heavy female role. If she could maintain the anticipatory mood of the first night, she might discover something about the voice that she lost in the familiarity of the following nights.

Her bed was cool and soft—a down filled nest. She watched the traffic lights moving across the living room ceiling until her eyes became leaden. After awhile, the moving streaks of light blended into a world in which ghostly shapes raced about a misty landscape.

She awoke with a start, in the dark, and lifted the phone off the hook. "Yes," she said dreamily before she realized that the dial tone signaled no connection. She lit the lamp and checked the clock. Three-thirty.

She dialed the operator.

"I was expecting a call—I didn't get it," she complained.

"Would you like to report trouble on your line?"

"Oh, no, I—I was supposed to be called and I wondered if the call couldn't get through."

"Do you want me to check your line?"

"No—please don't bother," she said in sudden fright. "I don't want any—any interference. I must get the call—it's so important."

"I can report your number to a service operator—"

She cut off the metallic voice and sat on the edge of the bed, cradling the droning receiver in her arms. The night swirled around her, pierced only by the distant street lamp outside the front windows. She rocked her body slowly, the monotonous pulsating of the live wire hum of the receiver a savage accompaniment to her motions. There was no reason to cradle the phone. There would be no more calls. Somehow she had destroyed this thing that had been hers—hers alone. She sought in her mind for the maleness and found only more night shadows. One is only a half of two. Slowly and languidly, she stood up, letting the phone sway in the dark at the end of the wire, and dropped her gown about her feet.

At the window she parted the drapes and standing, arms outstretched, the pale street light molding the nude curves of her body, said softly, as though moaning to the night wind, "See me, I'm just a woman—I'm only a woman who needs a man."

SUMMER HEAT

BY

CONSTANCE PIKE

It was August in Charleston, and the heat had a heavy liquid weight that dulled senses but put nerves on edge.

THE REASON we had to go to Charleston, Ma had to get our school clothes. I guess me and my brother and sister was the only kids in Horse Creek School that had clothes from Charleston—Ma didn't believe in buyin' at the company store. And I had to go with her because I was the least one, and she was scared I'd get into trouble.

It musta been about ten o'clock when we come in sight of the capitol building, and already blazin' hot. The gold top of the building looked like fire in the August sun. I'd been droppin' little hints about stayin' with Ruby Moore while Ma went on to the store, but she hadn't said much. Now we was gettin' close so I just asked her straight out.

"Guess it'll be all right," she said, and lifted a big white handkerchief to mop her forehead. "Only thing, Miz Moore might have to go to work, and then what'll you do?"

"Gosh, Ma. Ruby's ten years old. We can stay by ourselves. She and me'll just play." I hugged myself and waited for the old Chevy to get to the narrow street beside the railroad tracks.

We generally stopped to see Ruby and Miz Moore when we come to Charleston, but Ma never stayed very long. And now that Miz Moore

was workin', Ma didn't get out—sometimes just talked a few minutes, settin' in the car, and then drove on to town. Seemed like they didn't have much to say to each other any more.

This day when we stopped beside the frame house, it seemed to be hunchin' down into the sandy yard even more than usual. I hopped out and run to the door and Ruby let me in. She didn't never say much, but she seemed glad to see me. Her ma was gettin' ready for the noon shift at the drugstore, but when she saw me she went to the door and waved to Ma. Then she went back to a spotty mirror that hung over the kitchen sink, and finished combin' her hair.

There was a fat man layin' on their old leather davenport, holdin' a blass of beer and listenin' to a ball game on the radio. Ruby and her ma didn't pay no attention to him, so I didn't neither.

We watched Miz Moore put on a silky blue dress, and when she was ready, we followed as far as the front yard. We stopped there and watched her plump figure trudge down the street. Soon she turned to the right, crossed a bridge over the creek, picked her way across the railroad tracks, and disappeared behind a warehouse.

Ruby let out her breath kinda heavy, but then she grinned. "C'mon, let's us go play." She grabbed my arm and run along the street, pullin' me behind her.

It sure was fun lookin' all over the street, and runnin' up into the cool-lookin' green hills behind it. Then we waded in the little bitty creek that curled by in front, and climbed the bank on the other side and stood on the railroad tracks. When a train come near, we'd run screamin' back to the creek.

After awhile it got too hot for us, so we set down under the old willow tree in Ruby's front yard and made pictures in the sand. Once the fat man inside the house come to the door and called her, but she just set still and played like she didn't hear him. He watched her for a minute and then crooked his finger at me. I got up to go see what he wanted, but Ruby stuck out her foot and tripped me. Before I could get up she whispered, "Don't go." So I just laid there.

I reckon it was around two o'clock when a little skinny woman struggled up the street, pushin' one birdleg after the other, and stopped beside us.

"Mama home, Ruby?" she asked, breathin' heavy like she was real tired.

"You know she ain't," Ruby told her, starin' at the woman with a funny look on her face. I kept quiet.

"Remember, don't tell," the woman said, real soft, and she opened her pale blue eyes wide.

Ruby nodded, and the woman went real careful over the broken walk and disappeared inside the house. Ruby set still until the

screendoor slammed, and then started drawin' again. Her fingers looked so thin in the sand, like sparrows flutterin'.

"Who's that?" I asked. Ruby laid down on her back and looked up through the willow leaves.

"Roy's girl friend, Della," she said.

"Who's Roy?"

"Ma's friend. Old fatty in the house." She rolled over on her stomach and laughed.

"What is it you're not s'posed to tell?"

"Ma don't like Della. She's not s'posed to come here."

After that I guess we laid there under the willow for half-an-hour or more, tryin' to keep cool. We didn't talk much, so it was quiet except for a few locusts hummin' in the trees. I think I went to sleep for a little bit.

Next thing I knowed Miz Moore was lookin' down at us, her black hair kinda stringy, and sweat standin' in little beads on her forehead. Ruby set up.

"You're home early," she said.

"Yeah. I don't feel so good. Cold comin' on, I reckon. Think I'll lay down awhile." She went on to the house, and the door banged behind her, breakin' up the quiet, hot air. Then it seemed like the quiet gathered together again. Ruby got up.

"No sense in layin' here," she said. "Let's do something."

"Okay. What?"

"I'll race you to the creek. You can have a head start." We run, Ruby like a breeze over the hot soft pavement, and me stumblin' over all the tree roots. Ruby run right into the cool creek, splashin' water all over her dress. I set on a big rock and watched her jump around like a crazy dog, and then she fell down in the water and just laid there. After awhile, she got up.

"Let's go back now," she said.

We was almost at the willow tree when we heard voices in the house. Someone screamed real loud, the screendoor slammed, and skinny Della come runnin' through the yard. Once she tripped over a root and fell in the sand, but she jumped up quick and kept goin', down the street and across the bridge. We watched her go out of sight toward town.

Next thing, Roy come runnin' out of the house and Miz Moore was right behind him, screamin' and wavin' a pistol in the air. She stopped, raised her arm and the gun went off. Roy stopped and dropped to the ground. A little puddle of blood spilled out on the sand.

Me and Ruby went close and stared at his fat, sloppy body. He made me think of a big hog wallerin' in the mud. His mouth was open, with a little bit of spit runnin' out, and he still looked scared. Miz Moore was standin' there quiet, lookin' way across the city to the mountains on the other side. When I sniffed, Ruby come and stood beside me.

"Give us a dime, Ma." she said. "We'll go down to Taylor's."

Miz Moore went inside and we followed. She took a dime from her big straw pocketbook and handed it to Ruby.

"You better go lay down, Mom," Ruby said. "Your cold is gettin' worse."

As we walked down the street, a big black car went screechin' by and stopped at Ruby's house. She just barely looked at it, and we went on into Taylor's. We climbed onto stools at the counter.

"Two bottles of orange pop," Ruby ordered.

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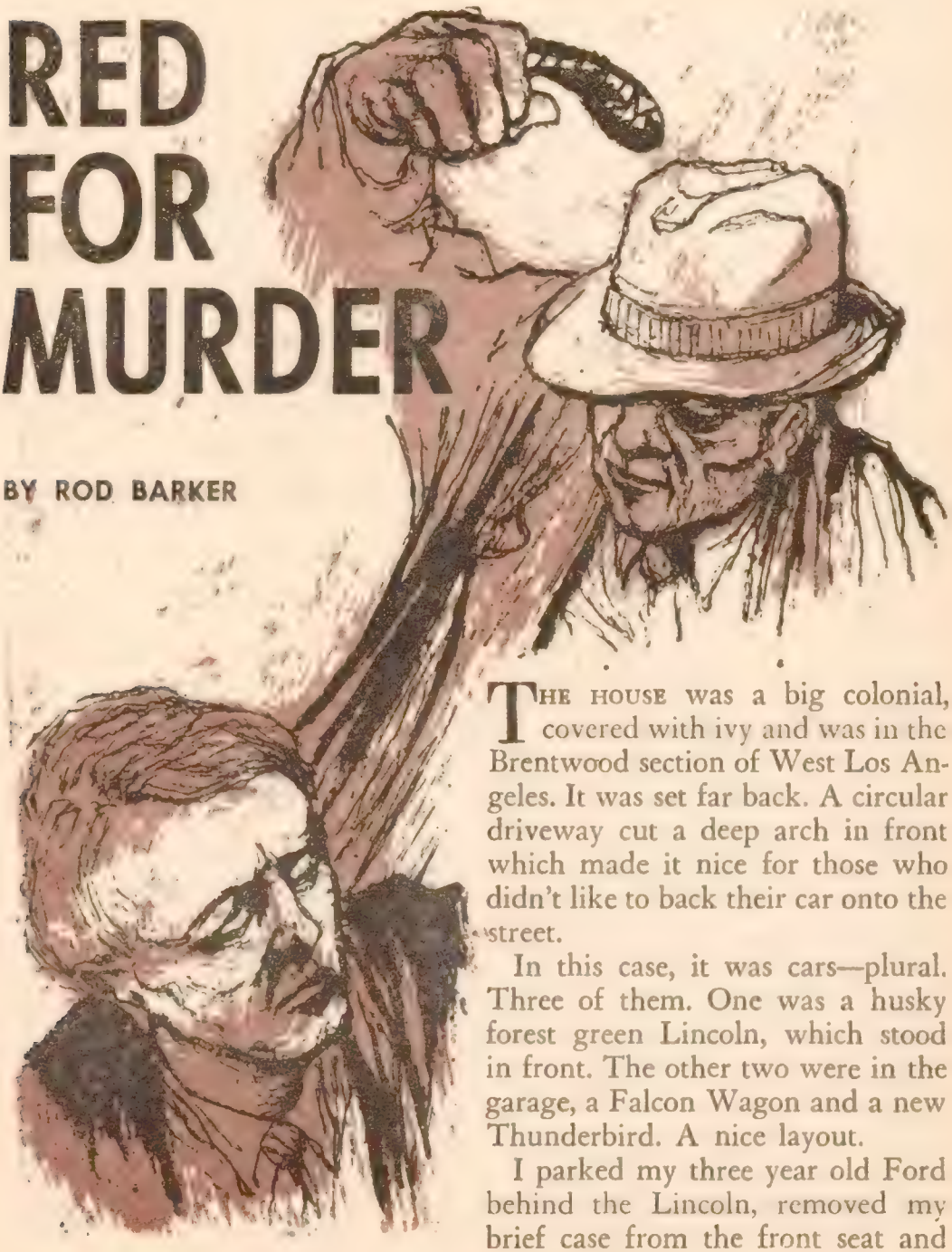
"Okay friend," I muttered. "Play it your way." I grabbed at the ignition key, switched it off, and threw it out the window.

RED FOR MURDER

BY ROD BARKER



THE HOUSE was a big colonial, covered with ivy and was in the Brentwood section of West Los Angeles. It was set far back. A circular driveway cut a deep arch in front which made it nice for those who didn't like to back their car onto the street.

In this case, it was cars—plural. Three of them. One was a husky forest green Lincoln, which stood in front. The other two were in the garage, a Falcon Wagon and a new Thunderbird. A nice layout.

I parked my three year old Ford behind the Lincoln, removed my brief case from the front seat and rang the bell.

A dusky maid answered the door. I told her my name, Fritz Bishop, and why I was there. She looked me over but didn't change her placid expression. That was all right, I've got my own circle of friends.

"Mr. Crawford's in the study," she murmured.

I followed her a short distance down a narrow hall. Everything was in good taste, down to the small porcelain figures standing patiently on a glistening mahogany table. Early American.

The maid pulled back a sliding door and nodded. As I started to enter, a girl crossed the hall near the rear. She stepped out of one door and into another, paying no attention to me. She looked of age.

I stepped into the study. Oliver Crawford, novelist, screen writer and celebrity of sorts sat in a deep red leather chair and gazed idly through the window. Beyond the panes were varied flowers, all bright, and some ferns. Books of all shapes, sizes, descriptions and contents surrounded the room. Also in good taste.

Crawford had a drink in his hand. He motioned for me to sit down. "So, you're going to write me up?" he asked caustically.

"Only with your permission, of course—"

"Hell! I let you in, didn't I? What do you want to know—the usual baloney?"

A regular hardnose. You run across them every so often. "Just talk," I threw back at him. "I'll pick out what I want."

He looked stonily at me. For a brief instant, I thought I might have had it. "Okay," he snorted. "I'll leave it up to you. But, remember, you're tromping around in my home territory."

Obviously, the interview was going to be anything but easy. Crawford was like an old bull in a Hemingway story. Mean. He looked bitter. I put it down as indigestion.

What I wanted was meat. I generally got it which was why I was able to free lance my material.

He had another drink and another. And a third in my presence. It made him talk, finally. Not much that I could use, though. He was windy. One hundred thousand words for one thousand I could put down. He wanted to go back to the old days continually, when he first hit it. I was his sounding board.

I began to feel he had something on his mind.

Suddenly, he surprised me by switching to politics. It wasn't so much the subject as the way he went about it, like a bench orator in Pershing Square. Now he quizzed me, asking me where I stood. I offered a few noncommittal grunts and tried changing the subject. We were nearing a verbal tug of war when the girl I had seen down the hall entered. She stayed me with her hand as I started to rise. Gently.

My first impression of her was

verified with a closer look. She was of age. Very nice, though on the slim side. She looked fresh and clean. Her midnight hair was cut short. Healthy color came through her dark tan. I wondered if she managed much tennis.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," she smiled. I tingled inside, a warm nice feeling. "Go right ahead—probably find that I'm looking for in his desk."

Crawford didn't move. "Translated, that means she wonders who you are."

"Dad!"

So, she was his daughter. I pulled in my horns a bit toward Crawford. He introduced me, calling her Slip. It fitted. I liked the name and was curious as to what her real one might be. He was right, the desk gag was only a ruse. She remained.

The time came when I couldn't ignor my watch any longer. I didn't want to go; however, it was obvious the interview was over. I thanked the great man for his time and went through my "Pleased to meet you's" with Slip. Yes, it should be in the *Times* the following Sunday. Could he read it first? If there's time, I answered. I always left it like that.

She showed me to the door, animated with conversation. We stood in the open doorway and chatted and I wondered if perhaps I could return sometime to see her. The thought of making a play occurred to me but I dismissed it. Plainly, the mood. Slip waited in the door frame till I was out the drive and down the street.

One thing, Slip Crawford had made an impression.

I stopped by the Cock'n Bull on my way home and had a beer. Then I had two more. I decided to pick up a book at the library and do some further research on my pet project, ancient peoples. Some men build boats inside of bottles, I happen to like history.

After that, I grabbed a quick bite and headed home. Back in my apartment, I switched on the stereo and changed into my pajamas. For the millionth time in two months I thought about calling Joyce. For the millionth and one time, I fought against it.

I read till around eleven and turned in. The next thing I was doing was reading the *Morning Times* about Oliver Crawford. He had been found shot.

He was dead.

The news jarred me. I read further. The article went on to describe the first reaction as being robbery and murder. From all appearances, it stated, Crawford had surprised the culprit in the act which resulted in his being killed. The only other person in the house at the time was his daughter, Linda Crawford. He was divorced.

Her name was Linda.

Apparently, I was one of the last

persons to see him alive. I glanced at my notes scattered about the coffee table by my typewriter. No use for them now. I gave thought to calling the newspaper and doing some side light material. Behind the scenes stuff. However, the vision of Linda Crawford in that big empty house in Brentwood changed my mind. I didn't want to take advantage of yesterday. Funny —because nothing had happened yesterday.

While I was pondering the question of calling her to offer my sympathy and how to do it, the phone rang. It was Linda Crawford.

I was more than a little surprised.

"You've seen the papers?" She had obtained my number through information plus trial and error with the other Bishops in West Los Angeles. She was very distraught.

"Yes—I'm sorry about your father."

There was a muffled pause as if she were crying. "Would you think it improper if I asked you to come over?"

"Not at all," I lied.

"I need someone to talk to, if you don't mind. Someone different."

"How about eleven or so?"

"I'll be looking for you." She hung up.

I fiddled away the time shaving, getting dressed and having a light breakfast. I listened to the radio on the way to Brentwood. More information had come in.

They were tying Crawford's death with a series of robberies that had occurred around Brentwood, Bel Air and vicinity. There had been five of them. The method looked the same. Evidently, the police were sticking by their first theory of Crawford catching someone in the act. There was no other motive.

Slip answered the door this time. Her eyes were puffy from too many tears. She stood awkwardly, rather shyly, at the door before letting me in.

We went into the study. I followed her glance to the red leather chair where Crawford had sat the day before.

"I don't know where to begin," she said hopelessly.

"No place to begin, don't talk at all if you don't want to."

Slip looked at me gratefully. "You're so understanding. Frankly, I feel a little foolish for having called you."

"Don't."

Then she folded. "I can't believe Dad's gone."

I let her have a good cry. Minutes passed. After awhile she stopped to wipe her eyes. "Sure hope you don't mind this exhibition."

"It's natural."

The conversation turned to idle chatter. Slip was being brave. She looked so lonesome as if the thought of having to go it alone was beginning to dawn on her. I followed her conversation as best I

could during which time she asked me to stay for lunch. I accepted.

Three o'clock came and went. In that slice of a gray California day, Slip had talked herself out. That was what she needed. A stranger to listen, not a friend to advise.

Finally, I left, wondering if I would see her again. I knew I would.

The remainder of the day was open. Nothing was scheduled. No articles to wind up, no letters to answer, no ideas to work out. I had free time. All I had ahead of me was mulling over the past two days. Even Joyce was shoved unceremoniously from my mind. A new face was taking over. I didn't fight it. I needed and wanted a new face, a new beginning. Linda Crawford.

I was restless and tried driving it off. Soon, I was pulling into the parking area of Larry's in Malibu. Larry's overlooks the ocean. The lapping of the waves make a nice background for whatever you're drinking. I had switched to bourbon.

I sat on the steel at the bar, listening to the surf outside blend in with the soft music of the juke box. As I studied the wet ring my glass made, I wondered what kind of a man was this Oliver Crawford. I couldn't remember his books, off hand.

I decided to check.

The Santa Monica library had two books by Crawford. One was a depression novel, the other, a theme about labor. I took them both. A bit later, I was at the West Los Angeles library. They had one book. It, too, had a "great movement" theme.

My sideline as a book reviewer came in handy. By 10:30, I had read all three. This was accomplished by reading the first two chapters of each in order to learn the feel, the mood, and skimming the rest.

Crawford was a sarcastic writer. He was angry. There was a thread weaving its way through every book. The movement, whatever it may have been, dominated all else.

A little man was scratching at the back of my brain. He wanted to get in. He had a message. I kept the door locked.

I awoke the next morning with a headache. All during the night I had tossed and turned—and dreamed. I had met a girl under a tree covered with leaves. It was the first day of summer. We were going to a park with all the rest. Something was going on in the park but I never found out what it was. We didn't make it. The girl and I got on a streetcar and kept riding, not getting off. When I first met her, she looked like Joyce. On the streetcar, she was Linda Crawford.

I had another dream. This time I was being chased by a lion across the grassy tundra of Africa. The animal was virtually snapping at my heels. Out of nowhere, a hut ap-

peared and I darted into it. For some vague reason, the lion couldn't follow me. The interior of the hut was lined with books. They were all by Oliver Crawford.

His death intrigued me. His daughter fascinated me. After my second cup of coffee, I made a decision. I'd snoop around.

Oscar's Book Store on Hollywood Boulevard had barely opened their doors for business when I arrived. From what I had read of Crawford thus far, the idea of his being killed by a burglar seemed curious and remote.

It seemed to me that if he actually had caught a burglar in the act, he might have offered him a drink and made an effort to learn what made the man tick.

I bought every book he had written. The words of a man tell a lot. They gave an insight into his character. Besides, he made good reading.

That took care of the rest of the day. I looked up from the pages at the phone as many times as there are letters in this line, and then some. Nothing happened. No one called. Not even a disgruntled reader. Very quiet. Wishful thinking had me hoping Slip would call.

Somewhere around four, there was a knock at my door. It was an insurance peddler. He tried hard for a few minutes before giving up. That was the only excitement.

I wanted to see the other houses also involved in the so-called series of robberies. Seeing them would give me a better picture in my mind.

I told the sergeant at the West Los Angeles station I was working free lance for the *Times*. I asked for the addresses of the five homes. He wasn't happy. He hemmed and hawed. In the end, I had my information.

I could have obtained it anyway and he knew it. I drove to Brentwood and up and down the streets. Inside of an hour, I had seen all of them and was satisfied.

Only one gave the appearance it would appeal to a thief. I knew if I were doing the picking, at least two of the homes would be unlikely prospects from the standpoint of safety. I ruled out an inside man. He couldn't be in on all five.

My mind began playing a dangerous tune. Oliver Crawford had been deliberately murdered.

Why?

Insurance? Will? Jealousy? Argument? Rage? The immediate motives came to me. Since some of them led to Slip, I dismissed them which left me with the connecting links of the five homes.

I looked up the owners, those persons who in the past ten days had reported being robbed. One of the names I immediately recognized. He was a big wig in one of the studios. The others were assorted professional people. One was a doctor.

All were good citizens, clean in every respect. No record. No reason

for them to report crimes that didn't occur.

I write for a living, mostly articles about celebrities, some book reviewing and very little fiction. I didn't know anything about murder cases save what I read in Perry Mason and Frank Gruber's books.

Yet, my impression of the homes remained the same. A professional burglar would simply pass most of them by. And, an inside man couldn't be in on all five.

What was the connection? Was there a connection?

The next few days saw me going around with the Crawford case uppermost in my mind. I constantly thought of Linda and called her twice but missed getting her both times. The papers and television were still on it but it was no longer front page.

I pecked away in my own way, feeling foolish most of the time. I was like a fish out of water.

It was while I was waiting for my order at Bob's Drive In that I noticed the item in the *Examiner*. A committee was meeting regarding a sort of peace drive. A committee for the SAFE organization. SAFE was a movement that worked on all kinds of efforts to promote world peace. Very highly regarded in some circles.

Normally, the item would have passed me. One name caught my eye. It was the doctor who lived in one of the five homes. I read it over several times. Everything was innocent. No hint of disorder. The car hop brought my order and I sat behind the wheel, munching a hamburger and staring through the windshield. My imagination started bubbling like an overheated tea kettle.

The little man at the back of brain was knocking again. This time, I opened the door a crack.

SAFE was a peace movement. The doctor was a ranking committee member. Crawford was a strong writer. He wrote of human agonies, always in defense of the underdog. The men in the ivory tower were bad. The working stiff was good.

The doctor and Oliver Crawford were connected in the same string of burglaries. Crawford was dead.

I began to dig into SAFE. Most of my information came from clippings in the morgue of the metropolitan newspapers. SAFE did more than peace drives. More than once they had put their nose into law cases involving minority groups. Constitutional cases.

One fracas had them defending a foreigner who had torn down the American flag. They based their defense on freedom of expression. They lost. Another was concerning the right of beatniks to open a coffee house in a better section of Pasadena. Again, they lost.

The phone was ringing when I returned to my apartment. I rushed to grab it before it stopped. I was

too late. As I brought out a cigarette, it began again. This time I was on top of it.

Linda Crawford was on the phone. "Hello, Fritz. Busy?"

"Never."

"I need cheering up. Interested?"

"Where'll it be?" I asked.

"How about my house—"

"Fine, make it eight."

"Make it seven," she said.

I realized as I returned the instrument to its cradle that she was calling and I was jumping. I realized, also, I didn't mind.

I liked it.

This time, we bypassed the study and went into the living room. It was spacious, yet not large. The decor followed the Early American pattern I had seen in the rest of the house. The couch and three easy chairs were covered in a homey chintz. Cape Codish. There was a fireplace containing a small cozy glow of a dying fire.

Linda put another specially cut log from a local patio shop on the fire. "So, what's new?" she inquired, keeping her back to me.

"I'm here, that's new."

"You know, Mr. Bishop, I find it rather unusual—"

"What's that?"

"When I want to talk to someone, I call you. What's more, you come. Like I must have said before, you seem to understand."

I grinned like a schoolboy. "I'm glad."

She stood and wiped the dust from the log off her hands. Then she moved to the couch. "Don't just stand there," she smiled. "Jump, dance, sing—do something. Better yet, come here."

I remained a few paces away. She sensed my confusion and laughed softly. "Don't be so serious. Do you want to sit across the room? Should we shout?"

I gave in and sat next to her. She nestled her head on my shoulder. "Thanks," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For being here."

I reached for her and pulled her closer to me. She didn't resist. The vision of the streetcar swept by my mind.

Later, she stood by the walnut bar near the fireplace, mixing drinks for us. "How did you happen to pick my father for a story?"

"He was famous and would make a good subject."

"Is that all?"

"The article was for the book section of the Sunday edition. Why not pick a top author?"

"No other reason?"

She persisted this one point. I didn't know what she was after. "Absolutely, no other reason," I argued.

She brought my drink and resumed her place next to me. "Please pardon my curiosity, Fritz. A lot has happened these past few days. I wanted to know what brought us together." Her voice broke.

We chatted, laughed, and she poured forth as the last time. The hours went by as if there were no such thing as hours at all. But, they did go by and it was nearly two when I stood to go. We kissed in the soft tones of the early morning and I left, thinking things I hadn't thought in years.

All thoughts of Oliver Crawford were forgotten as I drove home. A slight mist had come in from the ocean and I switched on the windshield wipers. I found a radio station playing soft ballads, mostly old ones. I cruised slowly.

Linda Crawford was the face in front of me. I relived the evening, finding it all like Fritz in wonderland. I was still going strong when I reached my place.

So much so, I missed the character standing in the shadows. There's a garage in the rear of my building. As I parked my car and headed upstairs, he stepped out. I was too preoccupied to notice him at first, let alone figure his motives.

I learned too late. All at once, everything around me exploded and I pitched into a black, bottomless well.

I was back in London during the blitz. Three of my cronies and I were down in the tube. We could hear the blockbusters above and feel the earth shake as they devastated the city. But, all we were immediately concerned with was our card game played by flashlight. Hearts. We had been on our way back to the base when it began. It had been quite an evening.

The throbbing pain pushed out their faces. I was now climbing a terribly high cement wall and failing miserably. Then I found it was the driveway.

I stumbled, staggered and fumbled my way to my apartment. There, I washed and dobbed at the back of my head. I looked in the mirror and was startled to see I had the same face.

I checked the contents of my pockets. Nothing taken. I tried to puzzle out the why's and wherefore's as I sprawled into bed and slipped into a deep sleep.

Noon rolled around when I finally turned over. I had been conscious of a banging far off, as if someone was at the door. It went away. I sat up and felt a momentary nausea. My head was as fuzzy as a cheap woolen blanket.

I labored through dressing and coffee. Mechanically, I went for the morning paper as if struggling for some sense of normality. There was a yellow slip laying on top of it. It was a notification of a registered letter. The letter was at the Westwood station.

In my business, a registered letter can mean money. I hurried to the post office. The letter was from a publishing house in Mexico City. They were familiar with my work on Malayan culture and wanted to

know if I'd be interested in doing some background for a contemplated project they had in mind. Sounded good.

I slipped the letter in my pocket and looked for the nearest telephone. Four rings went by before Linda answered. I juggled small talk and was about to ask her for our first bonafide date together but her tone discouraged me. She was distant and began stalling me. I was confused. I smiled to myself and put it down as a girlish reaction to last night. I thought I understood.

I stepped out of the booth and felt the letter in my pocket. Mexico appealed. A few days away from Linda might be good strategy. That, plus the thought of getting the Crawford case out of my mind.

The Western Union office was three blocks away. It took me several minutes to figure out the wording due to the buzzing in my head but I boiled it down to their sending more details, particularly about the money.

I entered a vacuum of time. I shrugged off contemplating anything till receiving a reply from Mexico. I was playing cat and mouse with Linda. I went back to Oliver Crawford.

One of the five families was a member of SAFE. What about the others? After a few hours of steady research, I was not surprised to learn the studio big shot had been one of those influential persons opposing the formation of the Hollywood anti-communist group. This was in 1947. He had argued on the grounds that Hollywood personalities should stay out of politics.

But, in the mid fifties, he had backed a Robert Cane for State office. Cane had been branded an extreme liberal and had lost.

The other three families were the same way. All involved one way or another with liberal efforts. All were far to the left.

Circumstantial evidence was forming a picture. The pieces were fitting in like blocks of mosaic tile. The grim spectre of Moscow was rustling the curtains, stirring a sleeping house, causing the dogs to bark.

In spite of my conclusions, I had nothing tangible. Nothing to take to the police. The thought of running up against the blank and watery blue eyed expression of a desk sergeant discouraged me.

I had to discard the robbery angle.

And, in doing so, I was led to the only other person who had been in the house with Crawford that night. I had avoided the obvious. Now, I could not continue my mosaic pattern without slipping in the pieces where they belonged.

If Crawford was red, and if Crawford was involved with the others, then it would stand to reason that Linda, by the very nature of being his daughter, would be aware of it.

I didn't like it. There had to be some other line of thought. There wasn't.

I wanted to forget the whole thing, go back to my regular way life, perhaps even call Joyce. I was afraid. But, I couldn't give up. The idea of walking out, not knowing one way or the other about Linda was for some other man, not me.

Still no reply from Mexico.

I had time on my hands and I had little time to do anything. I had conclusions about a murder and I had no evidence. I had guesses turning into doubts about a woman.

I needed a drink.

The man sitting at the far end of the bar joined me after a drink or two. In the afternoons, Frascati's on Sunset can sometimes be empty. This was one of the times.

He introduced himself. He was a salesman winding up what had been a good week in Los Angeles. His home was in Fresno. "C'mon," he asked, "let me buy you a couple of drinks."

I was going to argue but changed my mind. He told good stories. He also bought the next and the next. I was in debt to him for three; so proceeded to pay him off. By this time, the supper crowd had tripped in and Frascati's was buzzing. So was I.

He suggested going up the Strip and doing some bar hopping. Why not? I followed him out to the parking lot and slipped into his car. We turned right and headed west on Sunset. In five minutes, we were turning left into the parking lot of the Crescendo. The chatter was lively.

We found a spot near the middle of the bar and ordered. Two drinks later, we were back in his car. Toward the end of the second drink, he had began asking what I did for a living. I explained and he kidded me about the celebrities I've called on. Gradually, he continued quizzing me until somehow or other, the conversation led around to Oliver Crawford.

He asked me what I knew of him and I balked. My inquisitive friend explained he had always been a fan of Crawford and so was naturally interested.

I was becoming nettled as we travelled into Beverly Hills. "Hey," I growled, "thought we were going to the Rondelet."

"Thought of a new place," he answered. "Go on, tell me more about Crawford."

"There's nothing to tell, I hardly knew the man."

"You wrote a story on him, didn't you?"

"I was going to. Let's change it."

We drove in silence for a few more blocks. "Okay," I warned. "We've gone far enough. Suppose we go back—"

"There's this little joint in Santa Monica I want to show you."

"Some other time."

"You should see the girls. All of 'em are gorgeous and some aren't even half bad."

"No sale."

A smirk came over his face. "Well, buddy, I think I should show you this place for your own sake."

It was either him or the drinks, one or the other. What was certain was my wanting to get out. Call it to a halt. I looked ahead and saw the stoplight turning red at Bedford Drive. He wasn't going to stop. Instead, he zoomed through, narrowly missing a car headed south, and began going faster.

"Okay friend," I muttered. "Play it your way." I grabbed at the ignition key, switched it off, and threw it out the window.

"Why you—" he exclaimed, backhanding me. I fought him off and reached for the door handle. He tried to grab me but had to keep one hand on the wheel. His grip held me in the car. There was one thing for me to do and I did it. I pulled hard at the wheel.

The salesman from Fresno released his hold and I made the most of it. I jumped. I went down and over several times, rolling too fast to count the bruises. Before I blacked out, I saw his car hit a tree and explode.

I came to as the police ambulance arrived. I was aching from head to toe. They jostled me onto a stretcher and I found myself laid out and racing toward emergency.

At the hospital, a fat nurse smelled my breath and signalled for a sobriety test. There was no use arguing.

"You really must have had a snootful, brother," she said. "It's about the only thing that saved you."

"Couldn't have been that bad."

"It's pretty bad, all right."

A cop came in and glanced at me. "Can he make a statement?" he asked the nurse.

She nodded an okay. He came forward with some assorted forms in his hand. "Two boys out on the town. You guys will never learn."

"You don't know the half of it," I grimaced.

"Still full of vinegar, eh?"

"He was trying to kidnap me."

"Sure, fellow. He was a big bad man."

"Go to hell!"

The cop's face clouded. I knew he would have liked to have clobbered me. "Forget it, just make with the statement. Okay?"

I told him the story. It was easy to see he thought I was full of hot air. "He is dead, isn't he?" I asked.

"Very."

He filled in the spaces and asked for my signature. I took the papers, looked them over and signed. When the cop left, I laid back on the hard table and stared at the yellow tile bricks on the ceiling. The bright lights glared in my eyes.

This was too much. Monday, I was tapped in my driveway. Fri-

day, I'm stretched out in emergency. My mind went back to the salesman. He had been pinning me down about Crawford.

I felt sick. Linda had questioned me much the same way. When she learned what she wanted, she threw me over. Dumped me. And, I thought she was having a girlish reaction.

The light dawned. The interview with Oliver Crawford had been peculiar. I remembered his reminiscing and how he suddenly, and ferociously, quizzed me on the problems of society. His terms. Linda had come into the room at that moment. I had thought at the time he was acting like a man with something on his mind. His constant gabbing about the old days was like a man about to walk the plank.

That was it!

They thought he might have said something to me, something that would intimidate them. Crawford had been a leftist and probably a red. He was going to talk. And, now they had their finger on me.

The fat nurse returned to the room. She said nothing, simply went to a cabinet against the wall and reached for some sort of a vial.

"How soon can I go?" I asked.

"Not long." She didn't particularly like me.

"Are they going to hold me?"

"It's up to them. If it was up to me, personally I'd throw away the key. There's too many of you drunks driving around."

"You're so kind."

"Forget it."

The first cop came back. He had another one with him, an older man. They both looked down at me and went off in the corner to mutter between themselves. I lay for a moment then twisted around and sat up. "Okay, out with it. Where do I stand?"

The older man stepped forward. "You can go anytime you want to, mister."

I tried to return his look but he held his gaze of contempt. Two drunks out doing the town. They get careless and one winds up in the morgue.

I put my coat on, obtained my clearance and walked unsteadily from the building. As detectives go, I wasn't.

It would be a hell of a way to make a living.

Back at my apartment building a part of a letter was sticking through the box. It was the one from Mexico City. I ripped open the envelope and read the contents. It was a good offer.

I juggled the notion around in my head while trudging upstairs. I was in this thing good. Well entrenched. I had to know about Linda.

Knowing they had their finger on me made the game a bit easier. I would throw my guard up. I couldn't trust anyone, the publisher in Mexico included. I showered and sat down with a can of beer and

played the stereo. For the first time in hours, I relaxed. I dozed off for an hour or so and when I came around my mind had cleared considerably.

Waiting would make me a sitting duck. If the publisher was a gag, I'd know soon enough. If he wasn't, I could use the money. I picked up the phone to call Western Union.

I'd go to Mexico.

The next morning, I had breakfast, dressed, packed and called a cab. Forty-five minutes later, I was pulling into the terminal of International Airport. It was just after one o'clock that I felt the hard concrete runway of the Mexico City airfield come in contact with the huge landing wheels of the jet.

I hailed another cab, one that could have been used against General Pershing, and instructed the driver to take me to the Del Prado Hotel. I called the publisher's office from my room and made arrangements to visit their office immediately.

The offices were located in a large, white marble building. The building was out toward the university, in the newer part of the city.

A slight, mustachioed latin was waiting for me. He introduced himself as Senor Roberto Nunez. "Did you enjoy your trip down, Senor Bishop?"

"It was uneventful. I like my flights that way."

"Oh, to be sure." He walked around to his side of a massive oak desk and motioned for me to take a place on the leather office couch. "You come so sudden—oh, no problem, Senor Bishop. It is only that the principals involved in our project have taken off for their week end holiday."

"I hadn't made my mind up till last night."

"And, today you are here. A man of action."

"Why sit around in L.A.? This way, I'll have a chance to see your beautiful capital."

"Thank you, Senor."

"You were going to discuss some details?"

The latin giggled. "Oh, yes. My brain takes a siesta every so often. Please pardon." He coughed importantly. "Well, as you know Senor Bishop, from our correspondence, we are undertaking a cultural program. Our target is to determine the origination of our present approach to life. Where it all began, as it were, and where are we going. In order to know the present, we must know the past, the beginning."

"Textbook stuff?"

"More than that. Our material will be used by philosophers, politicians, teachers—"

"Sounds big."

"We hope so. And, thus, Senor Bishop, because of your excellent work on our Malayan culture, we seek your assistance."

Nunez then suggested I return

on Monday and meet the "principals involved."

He was smooth. The operation was nice and tidy. "We shall be looking forward to working with you, Senor Bishop."

"Likewise."

I was now about to play Dick Hero. I returned directly to the Del Prado but instead of going to my room, I went into the travel agency stationed off the lobby and ordered return tickets to Los Angeles on the next available flight. The plane would leave the next morning, Sunday. Completing that task, I headed for the hotel bar.

I ordered a martini, took one sip, and set it back on the bar. I went in back, as if going to the wash room, then ducked quickly into a door marked in Spanish and English, "Employees only."

The door led to the kitchen. I rushed past the stacks of dirty dishes, through another door, a long passageway and eventually onto the loading dock.

I stepped into the shadows of a nearby entrance to what was probably the cooler and waited.

I didn't have to wait long. A man stepped out of the door and from whence I had come. He was dressed in a business suit and was out of place on the loading dock. He stopped, looked both directions, and then my way for a long moment. I stepped further back in the shadows.

He swore and went a small distance down the alley but it was obvious he knew it would be fruitless. I remained in my position and as he passed, I managed a closer look. I had seen him before.

He had been at my apartment two weeks previously trying to sell me insurance. They knew I was in Mexico.

I waited too long. Too quickly, the insurance peddler returned. I inadvertently scraped my shoe and, birdlike, he focused his attention toward me. "Ha, Senor," he said, his face breaking into a broad smile of what must have been relief. "Enjoying a smoke on the terrace?"

"Something like that," I mumbled.

"Then, perhaps, you might have a light?" He whisked out a cigarette as he came closer.

"Certainly." I waited till he was very near before I lunged at him. Though he was caught off guard, it was evident he was well trained. He went limp, then deftly flipped me over his shoulder. I crashed into the trash bins and vaguely heard the sound of overturned milk cans. I rushed for him again and this time, he threw me heavily against the cement wall of the loading dock.

He didn't follow through, simply looking down at me in a sort of disinterested way. I arose disgusted, and climbed onto the dock and returned to the bar. I didn't have to turn around to know he was there.

My drink was still there and I downed it. I looked for my newest acquaintance and saw him sitting in a corner booth. Our eyes met and he graciously lifted his glass in a toast. The devil!

When I left the lounge, so did he. The trick was now to get away from him. I should have seen more movies. I decided to forget him for the time being and return to my room. I disliked the idea of staying in my room, but at least it was safe.

There was little doubt he had an accomplice, in which case it would be next to impossible to ditch them in the hotel. I looked out my window. No buildings close on either side. I was virtually marooned.

I arose early. The bright splashy colors of the city were all shaded in the pastel blues that come just before sunrise. I didn't pack.

I had a light breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, then casually strolled outside to the boulevard. Sure enough, a man arose from a seat near the end of the counter and followed me. At that time of morning and on Sunday there were few cabs to be had.

I walked across the boulevard to Alameda Park, directly across from the hotel. He followed, keeping his distance. In the open space, he couldn't hide but he strayed far enough behind to make it decent. I quickened my pace. He did the same. I began to run. I darted across the street on the other side and ran down two blocks. There was a bicycle parked at an alley entrance. No time for charity.

I pedaled till I saw a cab and threw aside the bike. We made it to the airport with no further problem. I sweated out the remaining hours till flight time. Nothing happened. I had made it.

I stopped by my apartment long enough to pick up my car. This time I was going to skip the formality of calling her.

The salesman from Fresno, the tap artist in my driveway and the insurance peddler in Mexico were sufficient for me to know my enemy was almost too much for me. I had two goals. Make sure about Linda. Save my neck.

A good offense is the best defense.

I rang the bell and waited. There wasn't a sound from within. A delay wouldn't be in my favor. I pressed the button again. This time, I heard footsteps. It was the same maid I'd met on my first call. She started to say something and I brushed her aside.

"Hey, where you going?" she screamed.

"Where's Miss Crawford?"

"She ain't here," I looked toward the stairs. "Now, you look here, mister—"

I skipped an answer and dashed up the stairs. Linda was in her bedroom, sitting in front of a dressing table and combing her hair. "Fritz!" she said as I entered her room.

"Surprise."

"What is this, some kind of a joke?"

"You can call it that." She was beautiful. I couldn't ignore it.

"I thought I made it plain on the phone we should stay apart, Fritz. At least for the time being." She arose and came forward. "You know I want to be sure about things."

"Sure you do, honey. So do I, that's why I'm here."

The maid had followed me up the stairs. "Do you need me, Miss Linda?" she asked, apprehensively.

"It's all right, Sheila."

"You sure?"

"Perfectly."

Sheila gave a long curious look. She didn't like it, no sir, not one bit. But, she took her orders and retreated back down the stairs.

Linda eyed me casually. "Really, Fritz, I don't understand you."

"I'm sorry," I smiled. "I had to see you—clear up matters."

"I know how you feel," she said softly. "I feel the same way."

"Do you?"

"Let me show you. Come here."

I went.

"You think I've been neglecting you—" She reached for me and pulled my lips to hers. It was a long kiss. Very warm. And promising. She sighed, "Still think so?"

"No," I replied, taking a deep breath and plunging in. "I simply think you shot your father."

The effect was electric. Linda jerked away from me stunned, as if I had struck her. "What do you mean?"

"Simple, sweetie. Your father was mixed up in the party. Evidently, he had had enough of the double talk and was going to come over to our side. Also, evidently, you're commie through and through. And, the only one who could have gunned him down—without raising suspicion, that is. Suspicion is the one thing you want to avoid. There must be no connection with the party."

Her voice was flat. "How can you say that, Fritz?"

"It isn't easy."

"You hurt me, thinking those awful things."

"I do think them, Linda. I don't like it and I've tried to avoid it. However, you can't ignore two and two. They add to four."

She heaved a deep sigh and dropped to her bench by the table. "You're so wrong, how can I change your mind? How can we go on, your believing I'm a murderer, that I'd kill my own father? The future could have been so bright for us—" She paused to look down at her hands, then turned up to me. "Hold me, dearest. Say you were mistaken."

I knelt beside her, embracing her for a lengthy moment. "Goodbye, Linda," I whispered. It was a very difficult thing to do. Deliberately, I turned my back on her and walked toward the door.

Suddenly, like an unleashed imp, she screamed. She hurled the dressing table lamp to the floor. I whirled to find myself staring at the business end of a small revolver. Behind it, Linda stood with a wicked smile twisting her lips. "You shouldn't have forced your way into the house, into my bedroom, Mr. Bishop. I tried to calm you down and you attempted to take advantage of me. I had to protect myself—"

I leaped for the door as she fired. A sharp, stabbing pain tore at my shoulder. I fell into the hall and staggered for the stairs.

Below, I heard excited voices. then the pounding of heavy feet on the stairway. I leveled myself in time to see two men rushing in my direction. They were flushed and in bad tempers. The smaller of the two caught me as I fell across his path. The other one continued into Linda's room.

The small man swore when he saw my wound. He seemed prissy and hastily pushed me away. I lost my balance and fell against the wall, then skidded to the carpet floor. The small man glanced at me briefly in disgust and joined the others. I could hear arguing as I scrambled for safety. The voices rose in crescendo and I distinguished something like, "Paul was identified—"

I had barely made the first step when a weighty hand tugged my collar and pulled me back. I was lifted, choking and gasping for breath. "What shall I do with him?" someone behind the hand asked.

"Put him in the guest room for now." It was Linda.

There was gutter laughter. "That's good, so he's a guest—"

I wanted to join in the fun but the combination of things caused a sunbright red shroud to drop over me. I saw a curious fireworks display. Everything looked like I was viewing it through the bottom of a milk bottle. Then all was quiet.

The single lamp cast a broad arc of light on the ceiling. A steady drone of voices, discussing, dissenting and deciding had penetrated into my subconscious, bringing me around. My shoulder felt as stiff as beach taffy. It was swollen beyond definition, and throbbing with pain at every pulse beat.

"He's half one," I heard one say. "Let's supply the other half."

"How?" Came a question.

"Purely mechanics. He will have to be disposed of sooner or later."

"Not here, though."

"I suppose not."

Linda's voice broke in. "Too bad you came when you did. I had the perfect set up."

"You and your set up." The reply was angry.

It was good you did come, I thought to myself.

"Well, there is one thing for certain. With a bullet in him we won't have to wait indefinitely."

That was consoling.

I listened to a few more exchanges until the words became meaningless and I slipped once more into the limbo of unconsciousness.

The shoulder wouldn't let me enjoy the protection of sleep more than a few minutes. This time, when I awoke, there was silence. I lay in the gray area between darkness and light, sleep and wakefulness; the conscious and the unconscious. Then I became aware of another person in the room. Linda was sitting in the shadows across from me.

"Hi, beautiful," I blurted and moaned in spite of myself.

"Save it."

I turned to face her and felt a new, fresh shock of pain. It was a violent struggle to refrain from passing out. "I was right after all, wasn't I?"

She didn't answer. I fell back and stared emptily at the ghostly designs the lamp traced on the ceiling. There seemed to be little I could do. Outside, I could hear the occasional noise of a passing car. But, inside, it was as still as a millpond in July. Linda Crawford stayed in her place across the room, watching. Very quiet. The minutes ticked by. I waited for my fate.

It was a short wait. The door opened and the small man I had seen in the hallway came into view. "We've decided what to do with him," he stated matter of factly.

"I hope it's a good one," Linda sneered.

"There wasn't a wide choice. However, the idea seems sound enough. We're going to bury him in your back yard."

"That's absurd," Linda cried. "If he's found, it will raise all kinds of questions. Our work will be involved."

"I'm sorry," the small man whined, "but we've decided. What we need is time."

Linda was furious. She virtually was snarling. "Time! What kind of smorgasborg is that? Take him out in the ocean and dump him. They won't find him for weeks."

"I don't like your attitude, Comrade Crawford. These are orders given to me and consequently, given to you."

"We'll see about that."

"If your father hadn't betrayed us in the first place—"

Both left the room, continuing their argument down the hall. I was left alone. They probably thought I was too weak to move. I didn't know, myself, but I had to find out. Back yard, ocean or the mountains, they would soon decide and return. At best I had no more than a quarter of an hour. Even at that, it was a toss up.

I found it almost impossible to move, let alone achieve the ambitions of sitting then standing. I began by wiggling my legs, like some sort of a fish, till I had them draped over the edge of the bed.

My biggest problem was unconsciousness.

I managed to sit up. The room blurred and went around for a moment. I held on and it passed. Then I stood and immediately fell to the floor. I lay, panting, fearful the sound of the fall had alerted Linda and her companions. The exertions had given me new strength, as if breaking through the inertia that had overcome me. I arose on one knee, then stood again. The sense of urgency forced me on and I moved slowly, shakily, into the hall.

Their voices at the bottom of the stairs sent me into Linda's room. There, I closed the door and moved over a small chair under the knob. And, none too soon.

I turned to see a white telephone on the bed stand. Thank heaven for the little luxuries! As I started to dial, I could hear movement in the hall. I got the emergency operator and hastily blurted out my story. Then I heard them try the door.

"You fool, you can't escape!" Linda exclaimed.

She jiggled the knob and tried pushing the door. I shot a quick glance around her room but there was no place to hide. Naturally. There was the window. I rushed to it as someone, probably the big man, began breaking down the door. A short, slanting roof greeted me. Below it, was the back yard. I stepped through the window and onto the rough shingles as the door smashed open.

I jumped.

The grass was a spongy wetness. I hit it and tumbled forward, sprawling on my face. Gunfire barked above me. Desperation forced me ahead into the shelter of thick bushes, ferns and trees.

I made one last futile effort of escape by clawing at the ground with my left hand. I thought I was digging a fox hole. Delirium had set in.

I stopped clawing.

My first impression when I awoke in that bright room was that someone had poured egg white completely over me and let it set. No portion of my body had remained aloof from the ordeal. Gradually, I shifted my eyes from side to side but my whereabouts still didn't register. The room looked like a cell. A somewhat cheerful place, but still a cell.

A door opened and I caught a glimpse of a nurse passing by, and then a man in a blue uniform came into focus. He was the same cop I'd seen a few days ago.

He studied me briefly then left the room, only to return a few minutes later with a man in civilian clothing. "He's come around," the cop said.

The man in the suit bent over me. "How do you feel?" He asked gently.

"Ever fall off the Empire State Building?"

He permitted himself a smile. "You sound rational. Think you can fill in any details?"

"You tell me," I said. "The last thing I knew, the Indians were closing in on the wagon train."

"Was it you who made the call?"

"What call?" I was still a little dopey. "Oh, yes—yes, I called you. That was just before I jumped from the window. They were breaking down the door—"

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Why not? I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The man in the suit waited patiently as I searched for the right opening. I began with the morning I had been down to see Cartwright at the *Times* and had received his okay to do a feature. I told how I had several names on my list, in case any or all of them weren't available. Oliver Crawford had been number one.

I told him of Linda and how she attracted me. Of Crawford's unusual behavior and my curiosity. I explained my findings, though none were tangible, and my conclusions. When I mentioned the reds, his eyebrows arched slightly.

"It ties in. The fellow who hijacked you had a record," he explained.

That must have been Paul, I thought. I went through the routine of what happened the night of the accident. During this part, the young cop in the corner leaned forward in interest.

Then I told of the Mexico bit, how I figured I was a waiting target and so decided to force the issue. "It wasn't such a hot idea," I smiled ruefully.

"No it wasn't. You know you should have reported to us long ago."

"Would you have believed me?"

"It's a moot point."

"Which brings us up to date. Now, it's your turn."

The man in the suit nodded in agreement. "Fair enough. As soon as we got a line on your buddy from Fresno, we thought it would be a good idea to put a man on you. You weren't home, so we planted a stake out. Dooley, here," he indicated the young cop, "said you claimed being a kidnap victim. Then, when you picked up your car, our man followed. When the call came, he was right outside. He radioed in—"

"Just like that," I sighed.

"We found the maid bound and gagged. Upstairs, we found the splintered door. That's all we found —" He coughed. "Outside of you, of course."

I stirred for the first time. "You mean you didn't get them?"

"Not yet. But, we will now that we know what it's all about—thanks to you." He arose to go. "Though, that still doesn't get you off the hook about not letting us in on it sooner."

"It won't happen again."

They left and I was alone with

my thoughts. I wondered about Linda, where she might be and what she was doing. I still remembered the girl who rambled on for hours at a time. Other things, too. My shoulder reminded me of the Linda behind the gun. What must have Oliver Crawford thought that night?

Then I realized thinking was getting me nowhere.

I pushed the buzzer behind me for the nurse. She came immediately. "Could you phone someone for me?" I asked.

"I'll try."

"Her name is Joyce Asher. Her number is Granite 80535—"

MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack

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A LICENSE TO KILL

It was a pretty sweet set-up. The only trouble was that a gun just isn't the proper basis for a love affair.

BY CHARLES CARPENTIER

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT FRANK DORIA glanced quickly through the report he picked up from the desk sergeant.

Beat Officer's Report
District Four
October 16

Statement of Mrs. Rita Woodward, 8221 Fairview St., City: Woman was asleep in her home when husband, Walter Woodward, returned early from night job at Carson Foundry. Husband surprised burglar in house. Struggle ensued. Husband struck fatally on head with burglar's gun butt. Claimed missing: about twenty dollars cash from woman's purse in bathroom and medium-priced fur coat with woman's name on lining label.

Officer's Note: Lock on back door of house broken open.

It wasn't much of a report, but it told Frank Doria everything he wanted to know. He returned the report to the desk and went through a door marked *Capt. Sandstrom, Homicide Division.*

"Captain," he asked without preliminaries, "have you made all the assignments on the Woodward case?"

"Not yet," the captain said, tapping a large cigar into the large ashtray on his desk. "Just the routine lab stuff. And Lieutenant Keats. It's in his District."

"I want to be on it."

"Sure. But why? There's nothing to it, judging from the report."

Frank sat down across the desk from the captain. "Personal interest," he said. "Walt and Rita Woodward have the house next door to us. Lived there about two years. They've been pretty good friends with Julie and me. Back yard cookouts and all that. I want a chance to nail Walt's killer."

Captain Sandstrom gave Frank a sympathetic look. "Didn't know you knew the man, Doria," he said. "The address didn't register. Sorry you've lost a friend."

"Well?"

Sandstrom smiled. "You're on it if you want to be. Just don't let the personal angle get in the way."

"Sure," Frank said. "Well . . . fine. And thanks, Captain."

Sandstrom said, "This is one of those off-the-cuff killings, from the looks of things. No planning, no real background on the thing. No way to tie killer to victim. It could wind up one of those cases that just lay in the files forever."

"I'm going to see what I can do about that."

"Just thought I'd warn you. Because of the personal angle."

"Thanks."

"Good luck."

"We'll probably need it."

Driving out to the Woodward house with Detective-Lieutenant Keats, Doria was thinking: Good luck, hell! Of all the guys sitting around headquarters waiting for something to happen, why did it have to be this guy Keats? Of course, it was his district. But Frank had hoped Keats would be too busy with some other case to spend any time on this one.

Keats lived by the book. Strictly regulation. One of those eager, hard-nosed guys who worked out in the gym three or four nights a week, practiced on the Police Pistol Range for at least half an hour every day, and studied law and criminal procedure like he was going to take the bar exam every next week. He was a married bachelor: married to his career.

He never let up on anything. And that meant it was going to take time, probably a lot of time—with Keats following procedure and all that jazz. And it was going to be rough on Rita.

But there was nothing Doria could do about it. He wanted to handle the case alone, naturally. But he didn't dare ask for that. Sandstrom might have gotten notions and refused to put him on at all. And that would have left Doria sitting out on a sawed-off limb.

"Give me the run-down, will you?" Keats said on the drive out. "I hear the guy was a neighbor of yours.'"

"Yeah. Lives right next door," Frank said. "Maybe you remember him."

The lieutenant glanced at Frank. "How would I know him?"

"Last year," Frank said. "The Christmas party Julie and I threw.

Remember?"

Keats looked thoughtful. "Woodward . . . Woodward," he said. "A kind of bald guy? Not very tall?"

"That's the guy."

"Had a good-looking wife, right? A whole lot younger than him?"

"That's the one. You remember him."

"Vaguely," the lieutenant said. "It was quite a while ago. And that was quite a party you had."

Doria briefed the lieutenant on the Beat Officer's Report. Then he said, "I called Julie from the station and asked her to go over and see what she could do for Rita. That's Woodward's wife—widow, I mean."

Julie answered the door at the Woodward house. "Rita's in the kitchen," she said. "I fixed her some breakfast. Poor girl hasn't had a bite all day. Mr. Mears is out there with her."

"Warren Mears?" Frank said. "What's he doing here?"

"Well, he heard about it before leaving for work," Julie said, "and decided to stay for a while and see if he could help out."

"Who's Mears?" Keats asked.

"Lives in the house on the other side," Frank told him.

When they went into the kitchen, Rita Woodward was sitting at the breakfast table poking listlessly at a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. Warren Mears sat in another chair very close to her, holding her free hand.

Cosy, Frank thought. Nice and cosy. He wondered how long this had been going on. "Sorry to intrude," he said.

Warren Mears skidded his chair around to face the door. "Well," he said, "I see the first-string team has finally arrived."

Frank ignored him. "Rita," he said, "I thought you'd like to know I've been assigned to help investigate about Walt."

Rita Woodward almost smiled. "Frank, I'm so glad," she said.

"This is Lieutenant Keats," Frank went on. "Maybe you remember him—at our Christmas party last year. He's in charge of the case."

Rita said, "Oh?" And then she added, "Yes, I remember him. How do you do, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant said, "Hello."

"Everything's going to be all right," Frank told her. "We'll take care of everything."

"I wonder if we could ask you a few questions, Mrs. Woodward," Keats said in an official manner.

"She's awfully tired," said Julie. "I was just going to try to get her to rest for a while."

"It won't take long," the lieutenant reassured her.

"It's all right," Rita said. "I'll rest later."

Keats looked pointedly at Warren Mears.

Mears stood up. "I was just leaving," he said. "I really have to get down to my office." He turned back to Rita. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me."

"Thank you," Rita said. "But Julie's here and she's doing more than necessary."

"Well, don't hesitate to call," Mears said again. Then he went out the back door and across the yard to his own house.

"I know this is unpleasant for you, Mrs. Woodward," the lieutenant said, "but I'm afraid it's necessary."

"It's all right," she said, glancing at Frank.

"Don't worry," Frank said. "Everything's going to be okay. Just think carefully before you answer. Be sure you're remembering everything right."

She nodded.

The lieutenant said, "Take notes on this, Doria." Then he started in on her. "You woke up when you heard the struggle?"

"Yes."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. It must have been about three o'clock."

"That was early for your husband to come home, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"What time did he usually come home?"

"About five or five-thirty."

"Now, when he came in, your husband turned on the light?"

"Yes. I guess so. Anyway, the light was on when I woke up."

"Good. Then you got a look at this burglar."

"Well . . . not a real good one."

"But you did *see* him. With him and your husband fighting, you must have seen him. In fact, you must have gotten a pretty good look at him, really."

Frank was thinking: Here goes Keats, the dirty . . . He's supposed to just talk to people and get some facts on something. But no, he's gotta act like a damned criminal lawyer cross-examining a hostile witness.

"Well, not really," she said.

Frank looked up from the note pad he was writing on. "Maybe he was wearing a hat? A cap or something?"

"Yes," Rita said. "He was wearing a cap. It was pulled down very low."

"Can't you give me *any* kind of description?" the lieutenant asked.

"Well, yes," she said. "He was dark, medium-sized, and he wore a jacket. You know, like those kids that ride motorcycles wear. It was black. And shiny."

"I see. And what did he look like? I mean his face."

"Well . . . he was dark. Dark, that's all. Ordinary looking, but dark."

"You mean dark complexion?"

"Yes."

"Was he anybody you'd ever seen before? Around the neighborhood —bumming around the streets? That sort of thing?"

"No. I never saw him before."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I just don't

know." Rita Woodward looked straight at the lieutenant for the first time. "Do you have to ask all these questions?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Woodward. But we can't do anything without some information to go on."

"But you know everything already," she said, still looking straight at him. "At least, I think you do."

"We only *know* what you can tell us," Keats said.

"Oh. Well, . . . it's hard to try to remember so many things."

"I'm sure you understand," Keats said. And then went on: "Did you see what this burglar hit your husband with?"

"Yes. It was a gun. A pistol. He hit Walt with the back end of it, I think—the handle."

"Did you see what kind of a gun it was?"

"No. It was just a gun. I don't know one kind from another."

"I see. Well, after he hit your husband, did he threaten you? I mean, he killed your husband when he caught him burglarizing the place. It seems reasonable he'd try to do something about you. He must have known you'd seen him."

"I don't think he meant to kill my husband," Rita said. "Maybe it happened because Walter tried to do something about him. Anyway, he . . . he started toward the bed. I was still lying in bed. And when he came toward me, I screamed."

"And what did he do?"

"He turned and ran out. He grabbed my coat on the way. He'd already taken the coat out of the closet and I guess he dropped it when Walt came in. Anyway, he grabbed it up again and ran out. I guess he'd already taken the money out of my purse before—it was turned upside down in the bathroom where I'd left it."

"Do you know how he left the house? Which door he went out of?"

"It must have been the back door," Frank said. "The report said the lock on the back door was broken."

"Yes," Rita said. "It was the back door."

"This is awfully hard on poor Rita," Julie said. "I mean, to have to talk about it and all. She should take a sleeping pill and get some rest."

The lieutenant said, "Sure. Just one more question, Mrs. Woodward. Was there anything else missing? Besides the money and the fur coat, I mean. Have you found anything else gone since the officer was here this morning?"

"No, nothing. Just my coat. And the money—about twenty dollars."

Lieutenant Keats stood up. "All right, Mrs. Woodward, thank you. You've been very helpful.

"Do you think he'll come back?" she asked.

"No," Keats said. "He won't come back."

"But he knows I saw him."

"I wouldn't worry about it. After all, if he wanted to kill you, he would have done it then. Not wait until he had to come back to do it. Wouldn't you think so, Mrs. Woodward?"

She nodded. "Yes, I guess so. You're probably right."

"Of course he isn't coming back," Julie said reassuringly. "Honey, I'll just run over home and get some clean bedding. When it happened," she added, talking to Keats, "Walter fell on the bed and then on the floor. There's blood and . . . well, the bed needs cleaning up. Is it all right to change the sheets and blanket?"

"Sure, go ahead," Keats said. "The lab and photo boys are all through in there."

After Julie had gone, Keats looked at Frank and nodded toward the living room. When they were out of hearing, he said, "Well? What do you think?"

Frank said, "What do you mean, what do I think?"

"Do you like her story?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Lieutenant Keats said flatly, "Because she's lying."

Here he goes again, Frank was thinking. Always trying to make something out of everything he gets assigned to. The guy is dangerous.

"What gives you that idea?" Frank asked.

"For one thing, her description of the burglar is right out of every crime report ever printed in the papers."

"Well, you know, she might have been confused, waking up to find a guy killing her husband."

"I don't think she woke up to find anything. It's my guess she's lying about the description because she *has* to," Keats said.

"Huh?"

"It's my guess she could describe the guy right down to a filling in his third molar if she wanted to. Her old man came home early. She said so herself. It's just a guess, but I think she was playing house with some guy when Woodward came home. And the guy got nervous and killed her old man."

Frank said, "Rita isn't the kind who'd . . . Naw, I think you're on the wrong track there, Lieutenant."

"Like I say, it's just a guess. But I'm guessing it's a good guess."

"Well all right, suppose it is. Who's the guy?"

Keats shrugged. "Don't know—yet. Mears maybe."

Frank considered the idea. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe you're right. Remember when we came in—in the kitchen? The way he was hanging on to her?"

"Could be the guy."

Frank thought about it for a moment more. Then he said, "Naw, that can't be right. Your whole angle is wrong. You're forgetting about the robbery. The coat and the money. If she was playing around with some guy, why the robbery?"

"A set-up," Keats said. "To make her story look good."

"Well, I don't know. But if we're going to go along with your guess, why don't we have a talk with him? Maybe we can still catch him before he leaves home."

"We'll try him," Keats said. "I'll run next door and see what he has to say. You go on back in there and take care of Mrs. Woodward till your wife gets back."

"Okay."

Frank waited until the lieutenant had gone out the front door. Then he went back into the kitchen.

"Are you all right, Rita? I mean, I hope the lieutenant didn't shake you up too much."

"I'm all right," she said.

"Everything's going to be okay. I promise you everything's going to be okay."

"Sure." She took a sip of coffee. "I suppose the lieutenant is wondering why I'm not all broken up about it. I just don't feel anything, that's all. I didn't want this to happen, but I just didn't love Walt. You knew that."

"Yes."

She got up, refilled her coffee cup and sat down again. "What's going to happen now?"

"Oh, we'll go on looking for a burglar—I hope." Frank turned one of the chairs around and sat down with his arms on the back of it. "Rita, I want to ask you something."

"Something in the line of duty or something personal?"

"Both," Frank said. "And it's important." He lit a cigarette. "Is there anything going on between you and Warren Mears?"

Rita looked at him sharply. "That's a pretty smart question," she said. "Coming from you."

"I know. But like I say, it's important—damned important. Keats thinks he's onto something."

"Onto what? What do you mean?"

Frank took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "I'll give it to you the way he gave it to me. He thinks you were playing house with somebody and that somebody knocked Walt off when he came home early."

Rita tapped her long fingernails on the table. "I knew he was thinking something like that," she said. "I could have told just by looking at him."

"Well, he sure didn't get it from me."

"I didn't think he did."

"Anyway," Frank said, "that's what he thinks and he's over there talking to Mears right now." Frank wanted to push her into admitting something about Mears—if there was anything to admit—so he added: "Because Mears was putting the grab on you when we came in here."

That got to her—a little. "What do you mean, putting the grab on me! He was just holding my hand. He was just being nice. Because of what happened."

Frank said, "Sure." It didn't tell

him anything one way or the other.

"So he was holding my hand. What does that prove?"

"Nothing," Frank agreed. "Except maybe it gave Keats the idea for what he's thinking."

"Well, I can't help what he's thinking," she said defiantly. She laced her fingers tightly together and sat there staring at them. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know I didn't answer those questions of his very well. But I'm . . . so confused. It's so hard to think. Oh God, I wish this hadn't happened!" She looked up at him. "Frank, I'm scared."

"I told you everything's going to be all right. There's nothing to be scared about."

She shook her head as if trying to shake fear out of her mind. "All those questions were just to . . . to see what kind of story I'd make up. Because he already has his answers from what he's thinking."

"Don't let it bother you," Frank said, putting his hand over hers. "Keats is always trying to make a big thing out of it whenever he gets an assignment. When he comes back, he'll have a whole new idea going."

Rita was looking down at the table, at Frank's hand covering hers. She didn't look scared now. She was almost smiling.

Frank jerked his hand away quickly.

She just kept looking at him with that half-smile on her face. She didn't say anything.

They heard the footsteps coming to the kitchen door. Lieutenant Keats said, "Okay, Doria, let's get a move on. Nothing more we can do here."

"Did you talk to Mears?"

"No. Missed him."

"Well," Frank said, "I suppose we might as well go find his office and talk to him there." He got up. "See you later, Rita."

She just nodded.

"Will you be all right?" Frank asked. "Julie ought to be back in a minute or two."

"I wouldn't worry too much about her," Keats said, with a touch of sarcasm. "I think she'll be all right."

When they were out in the car, Frank said, "Jesus, Keats. You sure can be rough on 'em sometimes."

Keats fired up the engine and headed the car back toward the main thoroughfares. "Sometimes you gotta be rough on 'em. Sometimes it's the only way."

"Why?" Frank wanted to know. "What's she done? Nothing. Not a damn thing you . . . that is, we can prove. She's in the clear, I don't care what you say."

"That's right. She's in the clear," the lieutenant said. "That's exactly why I say sometimes being rough on 'em is the only way."

"That doesn't make much sense."

"Legally there's not a thing anybody can do to her," Keats said. "Except shake her up a bit. And that's what I'm trying to do."

Frank Doria lit a cigarette. "But why? What the hell for? She doesn't deserve any of this."

"That's just the point," Keats said. "She's like all of 'em. She deserves every bit of it. And more. It's still my guess she was shacking. And it's also my guess she pushed the guy into knocking her husband off. For all I know, she may even have set the whole thing up by having the guy in the house when she knew her old man was coming home early."

Frank took another drag on the cigarette. "Hell, Lieutenant, you're dreaming. You've got your guesses and I've got mine. And mine aren't just only guesses. I know her well enough to know she isn't that type of a woman."

He looked out the window. "I thought we were going to run Mears down at his office. What are we going back to the station for?"

"Just thought we'd see if anything new has come in and go over everything we've got in the case so far."

Frank shrugged. "Whatever you say."

The lieutenant steered the car into the parking area behind the station and into a space marked RESERVED. He slid out of the car and turned back.

Doria was pushing on the door handle to get out when Keats said, "Oh, by the way. In the back seat. Bring that coat in, will you?"

Frank reached back for what he thought would be the lieutenant's topcoat. Something like a freezing cold electric shock went through him when his hand closed on a pile of soft fur.

He went for his gun. But it was too late.

He found himself staring straight into the muzzle of the lieutenant's .38 Special.

Captain Sandstrom sat behind his desk glaring at Detective-Sergeant Frank Doria.

"If this is true, we're going to crucify you, Doria," the captain growled. "We're going to make an example out of you every law enforcement officer across the country is going to hear about."

Frank looked up at Lieutenant Keats, who was standing directly in front of him. "Does Julie . . . ?"

Keats nodded. "She knows all about it. Or at least she's figured it all out by now. Had to pretend to help with the clean bedding just to get into the house Otherwise she'd never have believed me if I'd told her there was some reason for searching your place." Keats moved away. "From the beginning it looked routine. Too damned routine."

Captain Sandstrom was chewing savagely on a large cigar. "You could easily have gotten me to write it off as a simple unsolved robbery-murder case," he said.

"I guess Doria tossed the coat in the back of the linen closet in his own house until he could get rid

of it later. I was wondering all along where that coat was—and if it would ever turn up."

Frank said, "But there was no reason . . . I mean, I thought you were hot on Mears."

Keats shook his head. "I asked myself, if Mrs. Woodward was playing house with some guy, why would the guy have a gun on him? And then I asked myself what kind of a guy would have a gun on him whether he was playing house or not? For all I know, Mears may not even own a gun. On the other hand, cops carry guns like most guys carry a wrist watch. Some of 'em, like you, think they also carry a license to kill."

"Well," Sandstrom said, "how do you account for the money? The twenty dollars, or whatever it was."

"Never figured in it at all, is my guess," Keats said. "Doria just threw that into the report to make the thing look like an ordinary robbery and not a fur specialist's job. The broken back door lock was just a cover-up, too. Am I right, Frank?"

Doria nodded slowly. "Yeah, that's right," he said. "Everything you've said is right. You just don't understand, that's all. You don't know what a woman like Rita is like—I mean. . ."

"I know what you mean," Keats interrupted. "But I still say you were railroaded. I still say she set the whole thing up to get her old man knocked off. And we can't touch her for it."

"That's true," said Sandstrom, twirling the end of his cigar in the big ashtray on his desk. "We can't touch her. But we've got our pigeon right here. Even if it is going to give the Department a hell of a black eye. Now get him out of here and book him."

"Guess I might as well find a cell for you, huh?" Keats said.

Frank stood up. "Yeah. I guess so."

When they were walking down the corridor toward the cellblock, Keats said, "I suppose you know why she picked you instead of Mears."

"What do you mean, Mears?" Frank said. "Hell, Rita and I were going to shove off together—go to Mexico or someplace."

"Don't kid yourself," Keats told him. "She picked you for just one reason. Because you carry a gun—a legal one."

Frank was wondering about Mears now. He was already beginning to feel it way down in his stomach about Mears. He was thinking about the way Mears was holding Rita's hand when they all had gone into the kitchen.

"Bull!" he said, trying to kill the feeling in his stomach. "It had nothing to do with having a gun. It was because we were going to run off together. And she was afraid of her old man. But I'll say one thing for you, Keats. You're tough and you're smart. Everything

by the book. But I didn't think you were *that* smart. I didn't think you'd ever tumble to the set-up Rita and I had going."

"Smart had nothing to do with it," Keats said, pulling open a cell door. "You're just forgetting something, that's all. I met the lady last year at your Christmas party."

"What the hell's *that* got to do with it?"

"Well," Keats said, closing the door and signaling the cellblock guard to lock it. "I repeat: It could have been Mears, except that he probably doesn't own a gun. But I own a gun. A legal gun. Just like yours."

"So?"

Keats smiled. "So the only difference between you and me is, I wouldn't use my gun. Not for a dame like Rita. I turned the deal down."

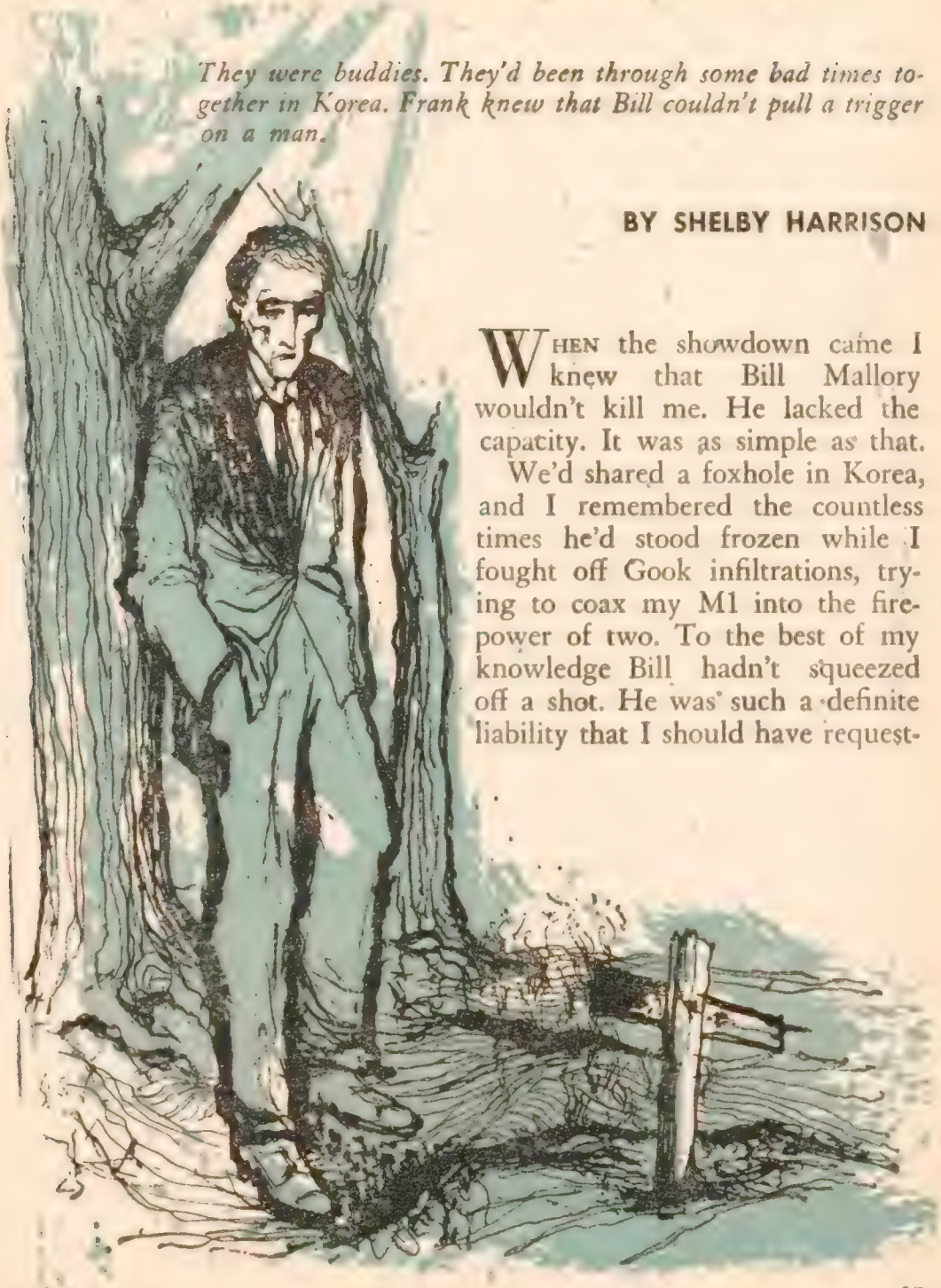
Frank Doria stared blankly through the bars.

"So long, sucker," Keats said, walking away.

FRIEND IN DEED

They were buddies. They'd been through some bad times together in Korea. Frank knew that Bill couldn't pull a trigger on a man.

BY SHELBY HARRISON



WHEN the showdown came I knew that Bill Mallory wouldn't kill me. He lacked the capacity. It was as simple as that.

We'd shared a foxhole in Korea, and I remembered the countless times he'd stood frozen while I fought off Gook infiltrations, trying to coax my M1 into the firepower of two. To the best of my knowledge Bill hadn't squeezed off a shot. He was such a definite liability that I should have request-

ed his replacement. Yet, rather than brand him a coward, I had shielded him instead.

After all, the mark of a man is in the thing he values most. If fear outweighs duty, a man is said to be cowardly. If duty is stronger, he is said to be brave. In Bill's case it was neither—deeper factors were involved. He found killing abhorrent and not worth the price of his own life.

In all our months together I never censured Bill. He rewarded my understanding with deep-felt gratitude. Slowly I became aware that I'd found a lifelong friend.

Still we parted after the war, and ten years passed before I saw Bill again. That was after a chance puff of wind wrecked my bid to dethrone Palmer. It happened like this:

That final day at Tam-O-Shanter, the champ and I had stayed neck and neck down to the very last hole. I'd been fighting the tension, trying to stay loose and natural, and as I drove the 18th my shot felt solid and true. The ball started cleanly, rising on its spin, carrying far out and beginning to soar. I watched it land favorable for an easy pitch home.

Hope rose within me as I plucked up my tee. All season long I'd been far down in the pack, with never enough prize money to make out on expenses. On this day for a change I had a chance at the bundle.

I studied the next shot. For a long moment I stared at the green and at the intervening sandtrap which I needed to clear. Before addressing the ball I tested the wind carefully. Not a whisper of air. Absolutely still.

When I stroked the mashie, I felt sure I was home. The ball hissed up steeply, hovered at the green. Then the wind gusted suddenly and the shot plunked into sand.

Though I knew I'd had it, I tried a last desperate blast. But I dug too deep and rolled short of the cup. Then I three-putted the green for a double-bogey six. That dropped me to third for a miserable four way split.

In full view of the TV cameras I bent the offending putter across my knee. "That did it," I said, my voice carrying loud and clear above the buzzing of the crowd. "To hell with this business! I've just checked out." And I stalked off the green without congratulating the champ.

No one believed me, but I'd meant what I said. That same day I drove to Prattsville, Illinois, Bill Mallory's home town. It lay two hundred miles south. I arrived at dusk.

"Ole buddy!" cried Bill. "What brings you down here?"

I told him I was quitting tournament golf. I said I was ready to settle down as a small town pro. If Prattsville still wanted me, I was prepared to do business.

In the years since the war Bill

had kept pestering me to come. Always I'd answered his letters with a firm, "Thanks but no thanks, I'm not *that* hungry yet." Now that I was hungry, I wondered if he'd come through.

"Sure, Frank, the job's yours. But are you serious about quitting? I thought you hated small towns."

"I'm sick of the rat race. I'm really through."

Bill grinned and said, "I don't blame you, pal. I was watching TV. That last act was great."

"I guess I got talent. Maybe Hollywood wants me."

"We'll outbid them, Frank, it's Prattsville for you. Seriously, don't worry about a thing, I can pull rank here. We've second-rater now. He deserves decent notice—say a week or two. Meanwhile you can stay here until the paychecks start rolling.

A little miffed, I said, "Just a minute, pal, I'm not *that* hungry. I may not be flush, but I can afford my own bed."

"Don't be a jerk, I've got five spare rooms. You're staying here and that settles that. Anyway, we've some drinking to catch up, so why waste time? Scotch or bourbon, which will it be?"

"Scotch," I said. "But go easy on the mix, so I can taste the smoke."

I lit a cigar and watched as Bill poured, aware that he'd changed, unable to decide how. He was too tensed up somehow. The old banter was still there, but it had sounded forced. The blue eyes were more cynical and much too evasive.

"How's it going?" I said. "Wealth got you down yet?"

"Frank, this will probably sound corny, but I'd be better off dead. When the old man died, I inherited all his loot. That was five years ago, and I've had nothing but hell."

"Want to tell me about it, pal? It might help to unload."

But before he could unload, Bill's wife walked in.

"Shari," Bill said, "this is my good friend, Frank Nieman. Frank, meet the wife."

I shook her hand clumsily, conscious of warm soft fingers in my dry calloused palm.

She smiled and said, "I feel I know you already. A long visit I hope, Frank?"

I nodded idiotically and held on to her hand. I've been exposed a few times in my 35 years, but never to a woman like Shari. She was a tall lovely thing with slim tender thighs and perfectly molded breasts. She had a deep even tan. She was wearing a low-cut frock of light-textured fabric that lent contrast to the tan and seemed to draw attention to her bosom without being too obvious. Helplessly my eyes followed the V of her neckline and fastened on the soft bronzed flesh ballooning out from the fabric. When I caught myself finally, I must have blushed like a schoolboy.

Bill rescued me then. He told her

I expected to remain permanently if everything worked out. She said she certainly hoped so, and that she hoped I felt welcome. The usual formal stuff, except that coming from Shari it sounded very special.

I haven't told you about Bill's property. He was wealthier than I'd imagined. His estate was located just west of Prattsville—acres and acres of wooded land, with a clean bluish lake that nestled in a valley. The house, itself, was secluded from the road. To reach it, it was necessary to drive up a long narrow lane to the north shore of the lake. The entire estate was surrounded by a tall white fence, and the lane was cut off by a huge iron gate. On the gate was an ominous sign that read, "Trespassers will be prosecuted. Wm. Mallory, owner." I thought at the time that it wasn't like Bill.

The house was two-storied and huge, more like a Scottish castle than anything else. Inside, the walls were of mahogany, and the entire downstairs carried a hunting theme. An enormous fireplace dominated the front room. Thick bear rugs were scattered about the floor. Dozens of mounted trophy heads looked out from the walls, and above the fireplace glared a fierce-looking bull-moose. To complete the theme, firearms of all types hung on each side of the fireplace.

That first day, after meeting Bill's wife, I tried to cover my embarrassment by pretending to admire the guns. There were several dozen in all, including an enormous elephant-bored weapon of German manufacture. I began to heft each gun, aware that no expense had been spared to make the collection impressive. I found them rusty from disuse. Only one had been fired, a finely-engraved rifle of the type used in tournaments. I found the safety pin open, and I pushed it on lock before replacing the gun.

At that moment the phone rang, and Bill went to answer. I continued with the guns, sensing Shari's stare.

"I take it you like firearms," Shari presently said.

"I'm no expert," I replied, "but guns do intrigue me." Actually I way lying, I don't like them at all. Guns remind me of Korea and the long months of hardship. I was trying to justify my actions to avoid further embarrassment.

"Bill hates them," she said. "He kicked up a fuss when I insisted on the collection. But I wanted a hunting theme throughout, so I just had to have them." She moved close beside me, then, and I felt the warmth of her soft thigh as it touched against mine. Only for an instant, but I knew it was too long.

Bill returned from his phone call and said he was wanted in town. He had extensive oil interests, and there was a question of lease-holds which required his attention. He said the whole thing might be tedious, but I was welcome to come. I

thanked him and declined. I tried to tell myself there were things about Bill that I needed to ask Shari. Actually my real reasons for staying didn't concern Bill at all.

However, it was Bill that we talked about, when Shari and I seated ourselves on the terrace that overlooked the lake. There was pine-smell in the air. The lake lay bathed in moonlight, and everything was quiet, except for an occasional chirping cricket and the gentle lapping of the waves.

"Shari," I said, "what's eating on Bill?"

She had changed to a tight-fitting blouse and brief white shorts, and I was conscious of graceful tan legs that were never quite still.

"You feel something's wrong? In what way, Frank?"

I gazed at the legs, watched them cross and uncross, then flex up and down. I marvelled at the knowledge that my first unease had vanished. That it only existed in Bill's presence hadn't occurred to me yet. I said, "I mean he's too withdrawn. All keyed up and edgy. When I knew him in Korea, he wasn't like that."

"You're right, Frank, of course. Bill hasn't been himself since early this Spring. It had to be the accident, though he wasn't to blame. You see, there's good fishing here, and Bill was generous enough to share it with the town. Then, in March, a local man disappeared. This man—Fred Gates—fished here daily, and they found his boat capsized. Apparently he hadn't reached shore. Though they dragged the lake repeatedly, his body wasn't found. Bill felt terrible, even offered the family a substantial sum. They sued him instead for an outlandish figure. When the case came to court, it seemed to warp Bill.

Suddenly I remembered the gate and its no-trespassing sign. "That explains, I suppose, why he posted the property?"

She nodded. "As I say, Bill took it to heart. I thought he'd get over it. If anything he's worse. I can't reach him anymore. He's cutting himself off, withdrawing from the world."

"Yes. That's it exactly. And I think I see why. Basically he's a big-hearted guy, but his generosity back-fired. Now he's all mixed up. Maybe I can straighten him out. I'll work on it anyway, you can depend on that."

Warmly she said, "I'm so glad you've come. In just a few hours you seem a very dear friend."

I wanted to tell her I felt more than friendship, and that I thought she knew. Just in time I remembered this was Bill's wife to whom I had no right at all. I shook off the impulse and made my first fervent resolve to keep my hands off Shari.

I succeeded after a fashion for the next ten days. I had arrived on a Sunday, and by the following

Thursday Bill had wrapped up my job. I would start in two weeks at a guaranteed minimum, plus the usual gravy that accrues to such jobs.

I tried spending the days in town to stay away from Shari. But Prattsville was small and midwestern, and I was bored in three days. Then I tried my luck at fishing, but that wore off too. Actually I was hurting for Shari, so much that I resented any activity that kept us apart.

It became more and more difficult to hide my feelings from Bill. Evenings, I tried to cover them with a stiff formality towards Shari. I seemed to get away with it, for Bill seemed as friendly as ever. But something had to give in a situation like that.

Something did, the following week. On Wednesday Bill was called to Chicago on a matter of oil-holdings. He would return the next day. I tried to be casual as I offered to take a room at the hotel. However I suppose I sounded guilty, because Bill glanced at me sharply.

"Are you kidding, Frank!"

"I just thought it would look better. You know—small town and all—people might gossip."

"You know me better than that. I don't care a damn about gossip. You don't trust yourself here—is that it, Frank? Because of Shari, I mean?"

"Dammit to hell, Bill, I don't mean that at all."

"Then forget about the hotel. You sound like a prude."

So that's how it began. Shari and I waited for nightfall, too keyed up to talk. Both of us knew, neither of us mentioned it. After dinner, we took brandy with our coffee and watched TV. Carefully we stayed downstairs until the station signed off. My mouth was dry when she started upstairs. At the top of the staircase she turned and waited.

Neither of us spoke. I stumbled to the top and reached out to take her. She came willingly, her breath already quickened into little quivering gasps. As we pressed together I sought out the moist warm lips. Finally she drew me to her bedroom at the end of the long hall.

That was a night of alternating passion and tenderness, more complete and fulfilling than any I had known. Near daybreak we slept. When I awoke it was noon.

Remorse hit me then. Except for the slow breathing of Shari, the house was still. I stole from her bed and sat alone downstairs, soaking up scotch and dreading Bill's return. When he finally arrived, in late afternoon, I was so full of guilt that I nearly turned and fled as he came through the door. Yet he gave no sign of suspecting anything at all.

Daily my behavior became more formal and forced. I treated Shari with a stiffness that should have been obvious. Yet Bill seemed to sense nothing.

I knew I should move, yet I continued to delay. My need was too great, I had to stay near her. I know Shari felt that way too, for in the brief moments we managed when Bill wasn't near she would fly to my arms in a bruising surge.

Then came the night I awoke to find her sitting at my bed. She was stroking my face and softly whimpering my name. I had to push her away and back to her own bed. On the very next day I leased the apartment in Prattsville.

It was an upstairs apartment, a short walk from the club. Bill helped me move in. Though he made no direct comment, I felt he knew why.

That was on Thursday, and Saturday the club manager phoned. I welcomed the news that I could start on my job. I felt it would take my mind off Shari. I was trying for a clean break, and that first week at the club I seemed to have succeeded.

The job was no better or worse than I'd hoped. I had daily sessions with beginners—mostly fortyish women and a sprinkling of males. I had charge of the pro-shop, and though we seldom used caddies I had charge of them too. In addition, I was expected to play several rounds daily with the more proficient memebers, giving them pointers and praising good shots. My work settled into a groove, and I began to enjoy it.

Of course, buried deep down, there was a gnawing need for Shari. But I scarcely saw her, and I hoped it would pass.

Nor did I see much of Bill—only on Saturdays. He had booked me for instruction, and since it was part of my job I could hardly do otherwise. I was glad to see that he was as friendly as ever. During our brief times on the course he never failed to invite me for dinner, and each time I refused politely with some trumped up excuse about a previous commitment. Little by little, I sensed that Bill understood. I realized he'd known all along how I felt about Shari, that he recognized my problem and approved my solution. Once in an unguarded moment on the green as I lined up a putt, Bill suddenly said, "You know something, Frank, you're a real solid guy. I feel deep for you, buddy, and it helps to know you're close by, even though right now we seem to be a few light-years apart."

Something warm, yet painful, turned over inside. I clapped Bill's shoulder. For awhile, as we finished out the round, it was as if we were back in Korea, trudging through the rice-fields side by side.

Yet I had no defense when the phone call came. Shari rang me at the club, on a Friday at noon. "Frank, I can see you tonight. Bill's in Chicago again."

I had an impulse to replace the receiver. That would break it off

cleanly, more so than words.

As if sensing my thoughts, Shari said quickly, "Frank, honey, don't spoil it. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I heard you," I said. "I'll see you tonight."

What else *could* I say?

The evening was more tumultous than the first one we'd spent. Our lovemaking was frantic, full of pent-up hunger which had been suppressed too long. Once, in the early morning hours, Shari said, "Let's run away, dear. Let's leave now, and drive and keep driving, and never think of Bill."

I tried to explain how I felt about Bill.

"But we've got to, Frank. The whole thing's unbearable. We've got to make a break before Bill finds out."

Later, after she slept, I lay awake trying to come up with some logical way out. I considered the possibility of laying the facts before Bill. "Look, ole pal," I would say, "I'm having a slight affair with your wife, and I have to play it honest because we're friends. We've even been intimate—Shari and I. There's a chance it's temporary—one of those flash-in-the-pan flirtations that presently pass. Meanwhile, why can't we pretend that nothing's happening? You know, the sophisticated way? Then after it's over, we'll be buddies yet, and everything will settle back like it was before."

Even as I considered it, I knew the idea was hopeless. Bill couldn't be sophisticated, even if he tried. In this system of values, marriage vows were inviolate. And the loyalty of a friend was a sacred trust.

I could only leave things as they were and hope for a miracle. If the affair cooled down, there was no harm done. If it continued to burn, there would be time enough to take Shari and leave Prattsville forever.

The next day was Saturday, and I reported to work late. I felt seedy and run-down. I was still fagged at noon and hoped against hope that Bill wouldn't show. But he reported at two for our regular session, and we moved to the first tee and began the round.

As I prepared to tee off, I felt him stare at me silently, and I had a sudden premonition that he knew about last night. As I addressed the ball, Bill coldly said, "Pardon the expression, but you look pooped out."

"So I'm hung over," I said. "Well, that's the life of a bachelor. No strings or responsibilities, just one big ball."

"Sure, Frank, I know. Open season in Prattsville—that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing? I don't follow you, pal."

"Need I mention that my wife looks beat? Dark circles and things. All the indications of a pretty rough night."

I had started my back-swing. It

was not in the groove. Though his inference was clear, I decided to ignore him."

"The thing is," Bill said, "I found a cigar butt in her bedroom. Very careless, buddy. Very careless indeed."

At the top of the backswing my self-control cracked. I tried to recover. But my wrists were uncocking and the club drove downward and exploded on the ground. I felt the head splinter and separate from the shaft.

It was my favorite wood, a custom driver with my signature engraved. I threw it at my feet and turned on Bill. For the first time in weeks I met his stare. "All right! You got something to unload? Let's have it out now. I mean, dammit to hell, why don't we quit going all the way around Robin Hood's woods. Let's have this thing out, once and for all."

I waited, while Bill stared at me solemnly. Now that it had started I was anxious to go on. For a moment I even feared that he was going to back down.

Then Bill said, "I guess you're right, buddy. It's got to come out. You're hot on my wife, is that it, Frank?"

"That's one way to put it. Some call it love."

"What do you call it, Frank? It's important that I know."

"So I guess I love Shari—love her until it hurts."

"All the way, that's how it is?"

"All the way, Bill. From here to hell and gone."

"You got an answer, Frank?"

"I wish to hell I did."

"Maybe I'll go noble. You know, agree to Shari's divorce."

"That's one way to solve it. The best way, I guess."

"And then again, maybe I'll object. How will you handle that?"

"I guess I'd take her with me—a long way from Prattsville."

"Either way I've had it? You've got the winning hand?"

"Better cards than yours. You want to call me, pal?"

"Why don't I raise you, Frank? Really lay it on the line. I feel for you, buddy, you ought to know that. Those months in Korea—I can never forget. But this thing concerns Shari, and goes deep too. Maybe deeper than friendship, so better not test me. Do I need to say more? Do I have to warn you to what lengths I might go?"

I knew what he implied, but I was convinced he was bluffing, that he'd stop short of violence in an actual showdown. I knew it would be pointless to continue the discussion. Like Bill had said, we had laid it on the line.

Bluntly I told him I didn't feel like golf. He agreed just as bluntly, and we returned to the clubhouse and called it a day.

I hurried to the phone as Bill drove away. Hurriedly I filled Shari in, before Bill could reach home. I told her to pack the barest

necessities and be ready to take off. "Tonight," I said. "Hide your bag outside. When you're sure he's asleep, slip down to the road. I'll be parked by the gate from midnight on."

"Frank, I'm scared."

"Don't be. Even if he tries to stop us, there'll be nothing drastic."

"I hope you're right, but I wonder if you know Bill."

"I know him, Shari. Trust me and come."

The next ten hours were the longest in my lifetime. I kept watching the clock through a draggy afternoon, then worked overtime to keep my mind busy. Dark finally came. When I went home to pack, it was half-past eight.

Precisely at midnight I parked at the lane. The night was cool and the moon stood high. There was no sound from the Mallory's and I kept glancing at my watch as time dragged by. Twelve-thirty passed. Then it was one.

At ten minutes past one I heard the first scream. As I vaulted the gate I heard it again. When I reached the house I heard scuffling inside. Then the lights came on. I pounded the door. Shari screamed again.

I lowered my shoulder, went somersaulting through. I was stunned momentarily. When I picked myself up, Bill had me covered with the gun.

As I rose to my feet, I heard Shari gasp. I gave her a brief nod, then turned to Bill. "Put the gun on the rack," I said. "You can't pull the trigger. Remember Korea?"

Whether Gook or Frank Nieman, I knew that Bill wouldn't shoot. He knew that I knew, and I watched his mouth work soundlessly as he hung up the rifle.

I thought it was finished and went to take Shari, wanting to lead her from the house before Bill broke down.

"Wait," Bill said. "There's something you must know."

I shook my head wearily, "Nothing will change me. Why make it worse?"

"Just five minutes, Frank. Is it too much to ask?"

I nodded. "Sure, buddy, sure. You got something to say, I suppose I can stand it."

I imagined he would appeal to our friendship, perhaps even go maudlin. I braced for the ordeal, determined to stand firm.

Instead he led me outside and into the woods that bordered the lake. We stopped at a clearing that was hidden from shore. Then I saw the grave.

I swallowed and said, "Not the fisherman? Not Fred Gates?"

Bill nodded simply, and kicked the soft mound of clay.

"But why would you bury him and not tell anyone? I thought he was drowned. I thought you said . . ." I stopped, remembering that Bill hadn't said anything, that I'd heard it from Shari.

Wearily Bill said, "Think about it, Frank. The answer will come."

I thought I had the answer already, but I hoped I was wrong. "You mean you killed Gates?"

Again Bill nodded.

"For God's sake, why!"

"Think again, Frank. That will come too."

"Christ," I managed hoarsely, "You don't mean Shari?"

That same listless nod.

I kicked the soft clay. Savagely I said, "Tell me about it, Bill! Lay the thing on the line."

"It's messy, Frank. I've carried it for months, but I guess it's got to come out. You see, Fred Gates fished daily but it was only a blind. Actually he was visiting Shari whenever I drove into town. The affair was months old before I caught on. Then it was by accident. I decided to leave my car in town for a major repair. I took a cab home and walked up the lane. I found them upstairs."

"You shot Gates then? What about Shari?"

"I didn't kill him then. I sneaked back out without letting them know. I thought Shari would get over him. When I realized I would lose her, I decided to kill Gates. My chance came on a blustery day when Shari was called away suddenly to the bedside of her mother. Gates began fishing at the usual hour. I took a gun from the rack and hid in the trees along the water's edge. I shot him. I swam to the boat and pulled it to shore. I washed away the blood and pushed the boat away from shore in a capsized condition. Then I buried Gates."

"And Shari never guessed?"

"No one else knows. Only you and me. Do you still want Shari? I won't try to stop you. But surely you must know that I'll turn myself in. I killed Gates because of Shari, and without her nothing matters. Is that how you want it? It's your bet, Frank."

So there it was, the roughest hand of my life. You see, I still wanted Shari, even after Gates. And I could have her for the asking, except that the asking was so hard.

In the end I simply whispered, "You win, buddy. Take the whole pile." Then I moved away quickly and headed for my car.

Bill's package caught up as I began the Florida swing. I'd caught the circuit in Atlanta, and resumed my losing cause with Palmer. Even if I never beat him, it's better than Prattsville.

When I opened Bill's gift, it helped to ease the pain. He'd remembered the driver I'd splintered that last day. He'd sent me a duplicate, along with a brief note. "Dear Frank. Don't blame yourself, pal, it was one of those things. I sincerely mean it when I say I feel for you deep. Your friend, Wm. Mallory."

I think you must know that the

note touched me deeply. It started me to wondering whether I really knew Bill. Why hadn't he frozen with Fred Gates in his sights? How was Gates different from a North Korean?

The answer, I finally decided, involved Bill's love for his wife. In the right situation even a coward can forget fear.

You see, he nearly shot me that night, though I didn't know it then. But the mark of a man is in the thing he values most. And no matter how you figure, I've got a life-long friend.

Willie Keener had been a sucker for dames all his life. They had taken all he had. But now, at sixty odd years of age, he wasn't about to be taken again.

The Woman Hater

BY LEO ELLIS

If anyone had called little Willie Keener a misogynist, he would probably have told them to go to hell. Little Willie didn't know what a misogynist was, all he knew was that he hated dames. With little Willie it wasn't a built-in phobia, it was a hate he had acquired over a long association with women. By using one feminine trick, or wile, after another, dames had taken everything little Willie has ever managed to get his hands on—except for the diamond necklace.

The square cut diamond necklace had been part of the Simon jewelry collection, the biggest haul little Willie had made in over forty years as a crook. The necklace was the only thing he managed to salvage of the loot, a dame got the rest.

Some people might have blamed liquor for the loss, but not little Willie; he reasoned that it hadn't been the liquor that had found where he had hidden the jewels, and then had walked out with it.

That had been Betsy, and if Betsy hadn't been a dame, she wouldn't have been in little Willie's hotel room in the first place.

Eighty thousand bucks the newspapers had said the insurance company had paid old man Simons for the loss, with the necklace the best part of the loot. Betsy would have lifted the necklace too, except that little Willie had dropped that in his shoe before he had passed out on the bed.

The piece had been too hot for little Willie's connections to handle then, so in a way, it was the neckless that had forced him to retire from crime and find the first job he had ever held. Now little Willie was janitor in a second class apartment house and lived in a dingy little cubby-hole between the furnace and the laundry room. He didn't have a television, instead, he would take the necklace from behind the loose concrete block in the wall and stare at it for hours, watching the lights leap and jump in prismatic splendor. Little Willie nurtured his necklace, and his hatred of women, as one, for they were inseparably linked together in his mind.

The buzzer over the chipped kitchen sink rasped irritably. "Go to hell!" little Willie rasped back, but obediently he pushed himself up out of the broken down easy chair and picked up his tool kit.

Mrs. Crampton, the manager, told him that it was apartment three-twenty with a dripping faucet, and without even a nod for an answer little Willie trudged up to the third, and top floor. Then grumbling, he knocked on the door of apartment three-twenty.

When young Laura McCready opened the door, little Willie was hit by the jolt he always felt when he saw Laura McCready. It was an uncomfortable twinge in the memory section, as though the girl had stepped out of his past. It wasn't that she reminded him of Betsy, for Laura McCready wasn't bosomy and blond; Laura McCready was small and dark and had startled doe eyes and slender fawn-like legs.

She gasped when she saw little Willie. "Oh!" she said, as her hand flew to her mouth, "I'm sorry, Mister Keener. I didn't mean that you had to come up this evening. I should have waited until morning to tell Mrs. Crampton about the faucet."

While Laura was making her apologies, little Willie pushed by her into the apartment.

"But this must be on your time off," Laura continued, then took her hand down to point toward the bathroom door. "It drips," she said, "it drips so bad it keeps me awake at night."

Little Willie dropped his tool kit with a crash and glared at the offending plumbing. "If you'd tie a towel around it, you wouldn't hear the drip," he said without turning.

"I didn't know that, Mister Keener. Next time I'll try that before I call you."

Little Willie shut off the water and picked up a wrench, but he was thinking of Laura McCready. There was something about the girl—maybe her voice, or her face, that pounded away against his memory. It was as insistant, and as annoying as the faucet dripping had been. He couldn't shut this off. He tried to sort through the hundreds of girls he had known, tried to dredge up one that matched Laura in some respect, one that he had hated enough to remember. It still hadn't come to him when he had finished the job, so he stalked out without speaking.

With Laura McCready's thanks ringing in his ears he closed the door and turned to find Bert Beasley in the hall. Beasley was standing before his own apartment, next door. Bert Beasley was a stout, red-faced man who smelled of shaving lotion and hair oil. The man jerked his head in the direction of Laura McCready's door. "Don't tell me you're making time with her, Pops," he said, grinning. "Maybe she goes for the old bucks."

"Leaky faucet," little Willie said.

"Yeah, sure." The tip of his tongue darted out and made a full circle around his lips. "She's quite a dish, eh, Pops?"

Little Willie looked beyond Beasley and shook his tool kit impatiently.

"Look," Beasley said, then moved closer, although they were the only persons in the corridor, "I want to make a deal with you." He looked back over at Laura's door. "How about letting me have your pass key for a couple of hours tomorrow morning?"

"Nope," little Willie said.

"I'd bring it right back, and nobody'd know. I'll make it worth your trouble." Beasley made a pass at his hip pocket.

Little Willie looked around Beasley. He couldn't get by the man because of the stair well railing. "Nope," he said again.

Beasley shrugged his thick shoulders, turned and unlocked his own door. Little Willie waited until he had gone in, then he went back to his cubby-hole and the necklace.

The next morning Mrs. Crampton sent little Willie up to help Hattie hang drapes. Hattie, the cleaning lady, was a toothless, cheerful woman with an insatiable curiosity she fed by rummaging through tenant's personal possessions. Little Willie didn't hate Hattie. He didn't even consider her a dame.

"Miss McCready didn't go to work this morning," Hattie volunteered when little Willie was up on the step ladder. "She claimed she wasn't sick or anything, but I don't know—she looked a mite drawn and peaked to me, not at all the way a young girl should look before her wedding."

Little Willie took the clean drapes. "Huh?" he said.

"You didn't know she was getting married?" Hattie's hands flew up in astonishment. "Oh, yes, she's marrying a young insurance man —a real nice young fellow, I understand. Of course these insurance fellows don't make much money at first, so I don't know how they expect to get along. Not unless she hangs on to that dinky stenographer's job until the first baby comes along."

Little Willie climbed down the ladder. "When's the wedding?"

"Now it's funny you should ask that," Hattie said. "It's not going to be for three months yet. I told Miss McCready that as long as you're dead set on doing it, you might as well get it over with. But she just shook her head and smiled that sad smile of hers. 'It has to be this way, Hattie,' she said. I told her not to put it off. Too many things can happen in three months, I told her. Why I knew—"

Little Willie took the ladder back to the basement, then went out to sweep the front sidewalk. The sun was warm, it felt soothing to his aching joints, so he took his time with the job. He pushed the pile of litter to the edge of the sidewalk, then a voice said; "Well as I live and breathe, if it isn't little Willie Keener."

Little Willie didn't have to look up to know who had spoken. It was a voice out of his past—he had lied to the owner of that voice; he had dodged it; he had cursed it too often not to remember. Now he walked over and leaned on the broom. "Hullo, Hale," he said to the man in the parked car.

The sad-faced man behind the wheel shook his head in profound disbelief. "I never thought I'd live to see little Willie Keener pushing a broom," he said.

"It's a living."

"Yeah," the man said, then leaned over to peer at the apartment house behind little Willie. "You work there?" he asked.

Little Willie nodded, then his features tightened. "Look," Hale, you ain't got anything on me. I've been going straight for five years now and they don't know anything about—"

"Take it easy, Willie, we're not rousting you. I just happened to drive another officer over here. She's up there in the building now, checking on one of your tenants. Say," Gale said suddenly, "since we're such old friends, maybe you could give me some information." He checked a pad on the seat beside him. "This is a girl by the name of Laura McCready, do you know her?"

"Only by sight," Willie said. "What do you have on her?"

"Possession of stolen property." Hale offered out a cigarette, and when it was refused, lighted one for himself. "Before she moved here, they found some stolen merchandise

in her other apartment," Hale said. "The girl claimed she didn't know the stuff was hot—the judge must have believed her some, for he sent her room mate up for a stretch, while this Laura McCready got off with probation."

Little Willie grunted. "She's keeping her nose clean as far as I know," he said.

"She's playing it smart then. Her time is up in three months."

So that was why Laura McCready had stayed home today. She had to talk with her probation officer, also, the three month stretch rang a bell. Laura couldn't get married until she was off probation. Little Willie pushed the litter into the gutter. "Well, so long, Hale," he said.

The sad-faced man nearly smiled. "So long, Willie. Almost like old times, eh?"

Later that afternoon little Willie repaired a clothes line on the roof. He was on his way down the narrow stairs to the third floor when he heard a loud voice below him. He crouched and peered over the railing. Bert Beasley had evidently given up the idea of having a duplicate pass key made. Now he was trying to force his way into Laura McCready's apartment. The door was partly open. The safety chain was hooked, so little Willie knew that Laura was inside.

Beasley heaved his shoulder against the door, then tried to reach through the opening to get at the chain. "Don't play it so cute," he said, panting from his exertion. Then abruptly his tone changed. "Come on, open up," he wheedled, "I won't hurt you." When nothing happened inside, Beasley straightened, and little Willie saw the sullen fury on the man's face. Beasley clenched his fists, then hurled his weight against the door again. "You're not so high and mighty!" he shouted through the opening. "I know what you are—I know plenty about you." He stood with his chest heaving, then gave the door a final, vicious kick. "All right," he said, "play it your way. But you're going to be sorry before I'm through with you, young lady."

Little Willie waited until Beasley had strode, fuming, down the stairs, then he returned to his own quarters. He didn't like Beasley, but none of this was his concern. He had pegged Beasley from the first; the guy was a tin-horn, no good. He was a small time operator who used his bartending job as a cover for other activities—but that didn't concern little Willie either. Laura McCready was a dame, so in little Willie's book she deserved anything she got. It was up to her to look out for herself.

In his cubby-hole little Willie locked his door, took out the necklace, then sat staring at the diamonds, trying to tie Laura up with some girl he had known. He hadn't been surprised to find she was in trouble with the law—that figured.

Then the thought occurred to him that she might be the daughter of some dame who had taken him. He tried then to conjure up what Laura's mother must have looked like. He got no results, so he put away the necklace and fixed his dinner.

He had only finished the dishes when there was a knock. When he opened the door, Bert Beasley walked in, and without a word placed a paper wrapped parcel on the table. "I want you to do me a favor, Pops," he said, turning to face little Willie.

Little Willie looked at the package, then up at Beasley.

The man took out his billfold, waved a five dollar bill in the air, then placed it beside the parcel. "What I'm asking ain't much," he said, making his voice hearty. "I pulled something this afternoon that I'm a little sorry for. Maybe I got a little out of line with that Laura McCready—but you know how it is, Pops?" He gave a broad wink. "Anyhow, I'd like to square it with her. I want her to have this." He pointed to the package on the table, then unwrapped it so that little Willie saw it was a white, clock radio.

"Why don't you give it to her?"

"It ain't that easy, Pops," Beasley said. "It wasn't anything, but she goes and gets all upset about it. Now she wouldn't take this thing if I begged her. I want you to slip this into her apartment tomorrow morning right after she goes to work. I don't want you to be obvious about it, so hide it in her closet. It'll give her a few days to cool off before she finds it." Beasley went to the door. "Good luck," he said and walked out.

Little Willie appraised the clock radio's worth with a practiced eye. It was a valuable piece of merchandise, sleek, compact, and small enough for a woman to carry. The thing hadn't been stolen, Beasley was too smart for that. No, Beasley had bought this clock radio for a single purpose; he was willing to go all out to get even with Laura McCready.

It was a frame-up, and this sort of thing had been so common to little Willie's former life he had spotted the deal even before Beasley had started his phony explanation. The plot was simple enough: as soon as Beasley was sure the clock radio was in Laura's closet, he would make a formal complaint to the police. He would accuse Laura, and when the police found it in her apartment, that would be it. When you're on probation, you're half convicted even before you get to court.

It wasn't surprising that Beasley knew about Laura's being on probation. A thing like that is hard to keep quiet, and with his connections it would be easy for Beasley to find out. "Good bye wedding," little Willie said as he picked up the bill. Five bucks in one piece had

been hard to come by these past few years.

He wasn't sure why he had dragged himself up to the third floor that evening. Maybe it was a last effort to put his finger on that elusive woman in his past, so he could chalk off one name, and know who he was even with when they picked up Laura McCready.

The door opened only a crack when he knocked, but through the opening he saw that Laura's eyes were swollen. "Oh, it's you, Mister Keener," she said as she unhooked the chain with one hand and dabbed at her eyes with the other.

"I wanted to check that faucet," little Willie lied.

He trudged into the bathroom, where he stared down without seeing the lavatory. If this Laura had been bawling her eyes out, or smashing things, or threatening to get even with Beasley, it might have helped. That would have been typical of the dames he had known, but this way he was as much in the dark as ever.

"It hasn't dripped since you fixed it," Laura said when little Willie came out. "You did a good job, Mister Keener."

Little Willie grunted and looked around. This was the smallest apartment on the floor, and the cheapest because the window faced out on the air shaft. "You don't get much light in here," little Willie said.

Laura shook her head. "It does get a little dreary," she said, then she smiled. "But I'm not going to be here for much longer—did you know that I was going to be married, Mister Keener?" She didn't give him a chance to answer, but chatted on excitedly. "We've found the cutest place to live—it won't be vacant for three months—that's just perfect, and it has a—"

The next morning little Willie hovered around in the front lobby, and when he saw the two men crossing the sidewalk from the curb, he busied himself with the potted palm. The men came through the door and headed for Mrs. Crampton's door. Willie raised up. "The manager ain't in," he said.

One man came over. "You the janitor here?"

Little Willie nodded and kept his eyes on the other man who was headed for the bank of letter boxes. "Who you looking for?" he asked.

The man by the boxes turned. "Laura McCready," he said.

Little Willie shook his head. "I don't think she's in, but I'll take you up. There's no elevator, you'll have to walk."

"We can make it if you can, Dad," the second man said.

Little Willie knocked on the apartment door, then turned. "See, like I told you, she ain't in."

"Use your pass key," the first man said. He flipped his billfold open. "Police."

"I don't know about that," little Willie said, backing away from the

door. "I think you have to have a search warrant, or something."

"We've got all we need," the first man said. He held his coat open so the top of paper showed above the edge of his inside pocket. "Get a move on, Dad."

Little Willie fumbled the key into the lock, then stood aside to let the men enter. They made a quick, expert search of the apartment. Then the second man came out of the kitchen. "Hey, Hank," he called, "look what I found under the sink."

The first man stepped out of the closet and whistled when he saw the diamond necklace. He walked over and examined it closely, then whistled again. "This is the real stuff," he said. "This McCready dame must be a bigger operator than we figured."

"I'm sorry gentlemen," little Willie said nervously. He ran his finger under his nose and hung his head. "Maybe I'm getting old or something, but I made a mistake. This ain't Miss McCready's apartment—her's is next door. This one belongs to Mister Beasley."

The two detectives ran through the other apartment and found nothing. They didn't seem to be interested in Laura anymore, all they wanted to know about was Bert Beasley.

After the men had left, little Willie sank into his easy chair with a sigh of relief. It was as though a heavy stone had been lifted from around his neck. He had felt that way ever since last evening—ever since he had watched Laura's face when she had talked about her coming marriage. That had made him remember—and no wonder the necklace hadn't helped—he had known this girl forty-four years ago.

The other girl had looked the same way Laura had last night. The other girl had the same radiant expression, the same starry look in her eyes when she had talked about their coming marriage—the marriage that had never come off, because little Willie had loused it up by pulling his first job.

The clock radio would make a nice wedding present. Beasley would be too busy to worry about the radio. The space behind the concrete block was empty now, that was the way it should be, he had been trying to hold on to the wrong thing. Little Willie chuckled for the first time in five years. He chuckled again. This wasn't a bad spot for an old man to live out his years. It was comfortable, and when he got the television over there against the wall—

SITTING here thinking back it seems like I remember everything in little scenes. Not like seeing a movie, the way you're supposed to do when you're drowning, but just little scenes picked up out of what happened. Some of them don't even seem to mean much, they were just things that happened.

It's pretty lonely when you're a balding forty-two years old and just seeing the light after a stretch in the pen. You got nothing to your name but a police record. And the only friends you've got are the wrong ones.

going straight . . .

BY RICK RUBIN

Like the smell of the air and the feeling of the sun the day I got out of the joint, the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem. How I felt like I could stretch out and touch the sky, that high blue sky with great white clouds like sailing ships floating across. And looking around, wondering if Ruby would be there, but knowing she wouldn't, she didn't have a car and wouldn't have been able to get away from her job, but still wishing I'd see her.

Then riding north to Portland on the bus, looking at the scenery and thinking back about things and trying to figure what I was going to do. It was just coming on spring, there were new lambs and colts in the fields and just the beginning of a haze of green on the bare tree limbs. And off to the east I could see the Cascade Mountains, still snow covered. April 4th, spring coming on, and me free again after that long second jolt in the pen. And thinking, I'm going to level it this time, no more of that for me. I'm going to level it just like I told the big spud, the warden. Because I'm forty-two years old and a two-time loser and not very lucky.

Riding along north toward Portland, seeing everything fresh like it was the first time, I was reminded of how I'd felt when I first came out here to Oregon. I was a young punk kid, out of work in the ship yards,

ready to beat the whole world and liking the wide, green openness of Oregon. Deciding I wasn't ever going back East, back East was just a bad dream of being too crowded and always pushed around. And making lots of big plans about how I'd make a lot of money and get married and have a house of my own.

But if I couldn't keep straight then, at that age, I should have seen that I wouldn't be able to do it at forty-two with a police pedigree and a bald spot on top. I should have been able to see that like I see it now, but a man is always lying to himself. He doesn't like to admit things like that.

I remember how it felt, getting off the bus in downtown Portland, looking for Ruby and knowing she wouldn't even know what bus I'd be on, then going out into the crowd and suddenly feeling so lost and lonely, like I didn't know what to do with myself without a screw prodding me from behind. And all the people, free as birds, going every different direction, knowing where they wanted to go and just going there.

Then up at the place where Ruby was living, in a section of town called Goose Hollow, an old rundown district of wooden houses. Standing on the doorstep of her apartment house waiting for Ruby to come home from work after her landlady had told me she wasn't home yet. And the rain had started again, I had to stand on the top step under the eaves, the raining coming down and me waiting and waiting. Until I saw her come up the street, still the same old girl, thirty-eight but looking lots younger, dark and trim and fine looking, her head down against the rain so she didn't see me until she was coming up the steps. And then she looked up and we stood staring at each other, and after all the times I'd rehearsed what I was going to say I couldn't say anything at all. So we just stood there.

And then upstairs in her apartment, just one big room and a kitchenette but nice and cozy. Neither of us saying much. She cooked me dinner and we ate, and after dinner I told her I was going to level it, to keep my nose clean and get a regular job and stay out of trouble. And watched her to see what she'd say, wanting her to say she was glad. And all she said was "All right, Howard. If that's what you want to do it's all right with me." My telling her that maybe she'd have to carry me for a while, until I got a job and some money, and her saying that was all right too. Everything was all right. But I watched her to say it was better than all right. Knowing that Ruby never was much of a one for getting emotional, I still wanted her to tell me she was glad.

Job hunting. I remember that too well. Standing in the state unemployment office, long lines of men

waiting for their checks or for any kind of information about a job, the smell of wet cloth and leather, of cigarettes and old sweat. And the clerk's pale white face, his thin lips saying "Sorry, nothing today."

Union halls and factories and commercial employment agencies. Each place different, but the same clerk saying the same thing. And in between pounding the pavement. Working harder than you ever work when you have a job. Sitting in a hundred dingy offices. Waiting with a crowd of men for any kind of job at all. Five places a day, sometimes more, and the rain coming down steadily, and getting home tired and discouraged to find Ruby tired herself from working all day. And sitting quiet at dinner and then together in the evening, not talking. Wishing she'd say something, anything. "It's okay with me Howard, you keep on looking." Or even "I can't support you any more Howard, you got to get out." Either one. But she didn't say anything.

I remember the way they look at you when you say you're an ex-con. Why are they so afraid? They aren't afraid of a guy who hasn't been caught, but once you've been sent to the joint you're an ex-con and they're afraid of you. Afraid to let you even dig ditches for them or tend some lousy machine. What does your being an ex-con have to do with that kind of work?

The neighborhood bars and taverns. Evenings we went there, Ruby and me, and sat alone drinking our beer. Not knowing anybody. The juke box making music and all the other people old friends, playing shuffleboard and joking, and Ruby and me in a booth, quiet together. Wishing we could be having a good time like the rest of the people. And passing The Greek's place, wanting to go in because that's where all our friends were but not doing it because I was going to level it and those friends wouldn't help me.

We were strangers in those neighborhood bars, the beer sign winking and flashing at us, the bartenders cleaning the bars, the customers talking and laughing, the clink of shuffleboard. And outside the rain, cold and lonely. My God, rain is so lonely.

Every day, pounding the pavement. Employment agencies, union halls, manufacturing plants, canneries. And signs that read "No Work".

I remember the first time I went back to The Greek's. Ruby was staying home and I started out for one of the neighborhood places but the rain was so cold and I was so beat. I just wanted to see some of my old friends once. Just talk to them, feel warm and friendly for once. Like you want to get right up against the heater when you've been outside all day and you're cold all the way through. Even if you know the heater will burn you.

And the moment I walked in the door of The Greek's it was like old

times again. Everybody there, everybody having a good time. Buying me drinks and asking about friends in the joint and pounding me on the back. Warm and comfortable, so happy I wanted to shout and laugh. Asking me what my plans were, and when I told them they all laughed. Bib Johnson making book on my going straight, offering two for one. And me getting mad and giving him five dollars that Ruby had given me, betting on myself to go straight for one year. Bib Johnson put the bet in a little white envelope and had the bartender tape it to the mirror back of the bar. And the music and the people, the old familiar people who I knew for a long time. Jokes that I understood, talk that made some sense, a laughing good time.

Then me leaving early, and everybody saying "Come in again soon Howard." And "Bring Ruby with you next time. You got no right to keep a good looking woman like that out of circulation." And I got a feeling of jealousy, wondering what Ruby had been doing while I was away. Coming in there? Who'd she been with? The same thoughts a man has when he's in the joint, hard and heavy and painful in your belly. But I laughed of course, I wouldn't admit how I felt. And then I went out into the cold rain, the smell of beer and whiskey and smoke and people following me out a few steps into the rain as though to tease me.

Walking home after that night feeling sorry for myself. I remember that, sitting here now, and I'm ashamed of myself for feeling that way, but that was how I felt. Poor old Howard Whalen, trying to find work when there wasn't any to be found and having to stay away from his friends, poor old Howard. No justice in the world. Only cold rain and Ruby saying nothing and miles of pavement and signs saying "No Work".

And the next time I went into one of the neighborhood taverns. How much duller it was, how much coolder. Even the beer tasted sour. And Ruby silent across the table, while all the local people were having what they thought was a good time. And me thinking that they didn't have any idea of what a good time was, they were a bunch of saps. Thinking me and my friends at The Greek's were the only people in the city who knew anything about being friends and having a good time. What a way to think!

So of course we went back to The Greek's. That is, I took Ruby with me. And what a high old time that was. Ruby dancing with every guy in the place and me dancing with her and with a few other women, and beer and drinks and all the guys. Being among friends. Bib Johnson showed the envelope with the bets to Ruby and told her what it was and asked her if she wanted to put down a little money one way

or the other. I almost held my breath, wanting her to show she believed in me, but she said she guessed she'd keep her money in her purse. And feeling that hard knot of jealousy and loneliness in my gut again, though it was too good an evening to feel that way long. But she should have showed more faith in me, I see that now. It would have made a lot of difference for her to be behind me instead of just waiting to see.

I remember how the weather cleared then for a few days, spring was going to be there. But not quite yet. The rains came back. There was a hole in my left shoe and the water squished up every time I took a step. One morning I had to ask Ruby for money to have my shoes re-soled. It hurt me to have to ask her, she was giving me enough money already. But she never complained once. I should have seen that and known she was behind me.

It got so every time we went out it was to The Greek's. It was just so damn much more fun than any of those neighborhood places. And one night coming home, walking up Jefferson street, a squad car pulled across an intersection in front of us. I showed the cop my I.D. and he remembered me from somewhere and asked me if I wasn't just out of the joint. I said yes, and he said hadn't I better stay away from The Greek's? And I said what business was it of his, and he said it wasn't any business, but if I wanted to go straight I should stay away from the kind of people who hung around The Greek's.

Instead of listening to what he said I just got pushed out of shape. What right did he have to bug me, I thought. Wasn't I trying my best to level it? And every time after that when I'd see a patrol car cruise by I'd get the feeling that they were shagging me or something. But I still went to The Greek's. I didn't have any sense at all.

I remember the night Cecil Ransome came over. Ruby and I were sitting in The Greek's having a beer and he came over and said "Mind if I join you?" and I said it was okay by me. A nervous little man with mouse colored hair and pale skin. A bumpy nose and no chin and he always had a million things going at once.

We talked for a while. He said how he'd heard that I was having trouble finding work and I said that was right, jobs were hard as hell to find.

"Things will probably get better come summer," he said.

"Maybe so," I said, "I hope so."

"Listen," he said, "I've got a proposition to make you. Why don't you have Ruby go off to the ladies room or somewhere for a few minutes so we can talk private?"

"Ruby can hear anything you have to say," I said.

"Well, all right," he said. "The thing is this: I've got a caper lined

up and I need somebody to help me with it. It's a nice . . ."

"I'm not interested," I said. "Don't even bother to tell me about it. You know I'm trying to level it Cecil."

"Sure, I can understand that. But what the hell, you've got to have something to live on until you find a job. Isn't that right Ruby?"

"I don't know," Ruby said.

"What kind of an answer is that?" I said. "I thought you wanted me to level it. Aren't you even going to back me up?"

"Listen Howard," Cecil said, "You've got to think of Ruby too. She can't keep supporting you forever. She deserves a few little extras in life, and she can't have them as long as you're both living on her pay."

"Is that right Ruby?" I said. "Is that the way you feel? You know I'm a two-time loser and that the next time they might belt me out for good as a habitual. What do you say Ruby?"

"Listen Howard," Cecil said, "You don't want to look at it that way. This isn't one of those little penny-ante heists you used to get caught pulling. This isn't some neighborhood grocery store or an owl job. This is a jug heavy that's worth the risk. A fat little small town bank. And there's damn little risk either."

"What do you say Ruby?" I said.

"Well, you might as well at least listen to what Cecil has to say," she said.

So I listened. Sitting there in The Greek's, in the half dark with music in the background and friends all around and drinks in front of us. Cecil leaned across the table and layed the whole gaff and I sat and listened and when he was done I looked at Ruby, wanting her to say something or show some sign of encouragement. But she didn't seem to care one way or the other.

And the day we pulled the heist. Three in the afternoon, a steady drizzle coming down, the whole countryside looking drowned, the trees with their thin coverings of new leaves standing out in the fields just taking the rain on their backs, cattle head down in the fields. We drove about twenty-five miles out of Portland to the outskirts of a little town where the bank was located. All the way out Cecil talked about his foolproof plan, about how the town had five or six exit roads and we would steal a car and go out of town the opposite direction and then circle around back to his car and push the stolen short in the river and drive back into Portland.

We parked by the river in a soggy highway shoulder, near a barn and a deserted house. Then we walked in toward the town, and found a car, hot-wired it, and drove the rest of the way in. A rain-soaked little town, all the people indoors out of the rain. A main street with a five-and-ten, a garage, the bank, a cou-

ple of gas stations, several grocery stores and some other places. We parked the short in front of the bank and walked in, and it seemed like it was as easy as Cecil had said it would be. The white, scared faces of the tellers, the one guard with his hands up, two customers with shocked looks on their faces. The teller nervously shoving the money into a sack, sheafs of green bills. Then we turned and ran and the people behind us set up a shout, and I didn't even feel afraid.

Easy. But behind us one stupid teller ran out with a pea shooter and as we drove off he shot three or four times. One shot cracked a window, and for a second I was scared, but we got away, both of us breathing hard now and wanting to laugh and shout.

The car ran out of gas half way around the circle back to Cecil's short. The teller had hit the gas tank. We stood there in the rain and my guts were like water. "To hell with it!" Cecil said. "So we walk."

And we walked, cutting across fields and through woods. The mud climbing up to our pants legs and over the tops of our shoes. Getting wetter and wetter, until we were as wet as we could get, but still trying to hump our bodies down against the rain as though it would do some good.

I remember how I felt when we saw the gang of high-school kids lounging under some trees beside Cecil's car. A tight knot in my belly. I might have been sweating too, but you couldn't have seen it between the drops of water all over my face from the rain. "To hell with them," Cecil said, "Let's go." "No," I said, "They'll remember us. We don't dare. They'll remember what we looked like and what kind of car it is."

Then lying in the barn, wet and cold, waiting and waiting. Those kids stood and talked, shuffling around and playing jokes. They wouldn't leave. I began to sneeze and Cecil was feeling sick. And the kids just wouldn't leave.

"We don't dare drive back now," I said. "They'll have discovered the other short and they'll have road blocks up all over."

"Damn them kids," Cecil said.

We kept peeking through a hole in the wall. It was nearly dark before those kids cut out. Then we sloshed back to the car, and the rain was even colder on us, we'd actually gotten warmer in the barn. And we had to drive Cecil's short into the river, like we'd planned to do with the stolen one. Because we didn't dare leave it there and let them find it.

I remember the walk across country, about ten miles, to the next main road into Portland. Through more fields and woods, miserable and wet and cold, and always afraid. Tight in the guts, nervous at every sound. And waiting in another barn all the rest of the night

for daylight and a bus because we didn't dare hitch-hike. Then finally the bus, and we must have been an odd sight, our clothes soaked clear through and covered with mud.

At Cecil's we cut up the score, and my share was over six thousand. Then I went on across town to Ruby's.

Ruby had waited up all night for me, and seeing her there, half asleep in a chair, I got a real lift. And stripping off my clothes, taking a hot bath, the feeling of warm water for a change and the sensation of clean dry clothes on my skin. I showed her my share of the score and she looked happy and sad at the same time.

Lying in bed, the smooth sheets around me, warm under the blankets. "We got to get out of this town," I told Ruby. "Now that we got some money we'll head south to California. If we stay here I'll never be able to level it. Look what's happened already. We'll leave as soon as we can."

"Okay," she said. "I don't mind."

She took my hand and squeezed it, and then she rubbed my back and I fell asleep.

And the awful sensation of waking up and seeing those two policemen beside the bed. The middle of the afternoon, sun streaming in the window, feeling tired and sleepy and weak, and those two cops there, hard and tough looking. "Get up Whatlen, we've got Ransome and he blew the whistle on you."

They'd found the car right away. The current had taken it down stream and it tore out an underwater telephone cable and when they came to fix it they found the car and put two and two together. When they collared Cecil he copped out on me, I guess because they promised him a shorter jolt if he did.

And then I was walking out the door between those two cops. That's the most painful memory. Ruby standing there by the door, dark and pretty and sad. I kissed her goodbye and she just stood there, not kissing back, hurt and beat. "I'm not waiting for you this time Howard," she said.

"No, I guess not," I said. "You can't spend your whole life just waiting for a man as useless as me."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not getting any younger."

And then one final kiss, and the ride downtown.

So now I've got plenty of time to think about it all. Sitting here, waiting for my hearing. For them to sentence me to another trip south to Salem, or to the long, long jolt as a habitual. Forty-two years old and getting bald. Plenty of time to think about everything. I figured it out and I've been just thirty-nine days out of the Salem Penitentiary. It's May 10th and the sun is shining and spring is finally really going to start. But not for me.

FALSE BAIT

A wise man thinks before he leaps. A wild man leaps first. Hatchis was getting wilder by the day.

BY DON SOLLARS

I'm pretty quick, but not quick enough, I guess, and that's why things didn't work out just as I figured. But you got to admit Hatchis deserved to be killed. Stupid? Man, was he slow!

Like that afternoon before it all happened. I was in the alley-way of my barn—right beneath the hole up to the hayloft—and like some kind of wild ape this neighbor of mine, Hatchis, leaped at me from the hay loft, .410 shotgun and all. I thought I'd been hit by a truck. "Where's my wife, Hollis!" he started screaming, standing up and shaking the .410 at me. "Damn you, Hollis, where you got her?"

You see? Stupid. All excited and about ready to kill me—just the way I wanted him. The thing was not to get him too excited too soon. But he wasn't that stupid—to shoot me right then and there. For one thing he was a coward. For another, he was shrewd enough to know that if he murdered me and got caught his score was zero—no Myrna, no nothing. Besides, he knew my brother Charlie was around the farm some place—could even be right outside the barn for all he knew.

No, Hatchis wouldn't do it like that. I figured he'd sneak a shot in the dark somewheres.

So I had to laugh out loud at him standing there quivering and staring fire at me. "Hatchis," I said, still laughing, "damned if you don't

beat all—coming over here and demanding I give up Myrna, just like she was some cow I'd stole off ya." He didn't say anything to this, just bit his lip and worried the rifle. "Your sweet young wife came to me yesterday of her own free will and that's the way she'll go back. That gun won't change things one bit."

He lunged at me then, pushing the rifle against my belly. "If I kill you, she'd—"

"She'd what?" I said. "She'd watch 'em take you off to the gas chamber, Hatchis, that's what she'd do." He backed off then, but with his eyes still hard on mine. "Now you get on back across the road and don't come back!"

"Let me see her, Hollis," he said, the scream all gone out of his voice. "I want to see her."

"It's no good, Hatchis."

"Dammit, Hollis—let me see Myrna!"

"You beat her, didn't you, boy?"

"I caught her—sneakin' back from over here."

"You tore her clothes off and beat her."

"The filthy tramp! I slapped her . . ."

"And kicked her."

"Maybe I did . . . once, I remember I only kicked her once.

"How'd you like to be kicked where she got it, Hatchis?"

"Damn it, I was crazy mad. Before I only *guessed* what she was up to—and I thought it was your brother. Then she told me and I gave her . . ."

"Told you what?"

"You—and her, over here. I seen her the other times, daytimes, nighttimes—and probably when I was to town . . ."

"You're nuts!"

"For weeks now—you and her!"

"Why didn't you come after *me* —beat *me,* Hatchis?"

"I was gonna *kill* you—and I'm gonna kill you now, Hollis, if you don't let me see her."

I shook my head. "She don't want to see you."

"I mean it, Hollis."

"Anyway," I said, moving out of the barn toward the house, "I figure you already searched the house. And she ain't nowhere around here. Look all you like. She's hid out till you cool off." Then I decided to goad him a little more. "A nice little spot you won't find . . . so's we won't be disturbed."

He brought the rifle up fast at me again and I slammed the barrel away just ahead of the blast.

The noise shook him. I grabbed the rifle away and pinned him against a fence post. "What's the matter, Hatchis—can't you stand to hear it? She's mine now. To do with as I want. You hear it!"

He looked at me kind of crazy then, like he didn't see me at all and he shook his head slowly back and forth. From over his shoulder I could see Charlie coming on the run with a gun. I didn't know if

I'd gone far enough with Hatchis. I had to make sure.

"Just as I want, Hatchis . . . and when I don't want, maybe you can have her back. Not until, you understand that?"

Charlie pulled me off him. "You're killing him!" Charlie said, and I saw that I had been almost strangling Hatchis by crushing his rifle against his throat. "Let him go." Charlie didn't like rough stuff when it wasn't necessary, though he wouldn't walk away from a fight, either. Right then I supposed he felt sorry for Hatchis. After all, in a way it looked as if I had done Hatchis a dirty trick. I didn't know how he felt about Myrna moving in. Being young it'd be hard for him to see how much a woman like Myrna meant to me. Or why I had to get Hatchis out of the way.

He must have thought I meant to kill him right then and there with my bare hands. "Give him his gun and get him out of here," he said finally. Hatchis's .410 was a single shot and empty now, so I gave it to him.

His eyes still glared wild at me. "You're an animal, Hollis," he said almost whispering. "I swear . . . I swear I'll kill you, Hollis."

The way he said it, calm and straight, while all the excitement gone, surprised me and shook me a little. I guessed I'd gotten to Hatchis real good at last. But, as he crossed the road, just for good measure I let out a loud laugh.

Then I looked at Charlie. He was still holding the shotgun and watching Hatchis. I sure didn't want Charlie in this, anyway you looked at it. And how could I tell him what Myrna meant to me? That I was absolutely nuts about her, wanted to marry her—more than anything I'd ever wanted. But I hoped he could see that, see she wasn't just temporary and what Hatchis had called her. Even though it must have looked that way. It could have to Charlie. He'd had plenty of women, and was young and, I guess the way things were, Myrna didn't seem any different. He'd understand later, know that Myrna would be good for me. I wasn't getting any younger, and the place needed a woman. It would be good for Myrna, too. She'd been in a living hell across the road with Hatchis. I didn't know if Charlie knew about the beating, but he knew, like everybody else, about how he worked her like a horse—man's work, plowing and cultivating with horses on that rocky, dried up farm of his.

She wouldn't be young and pretty for very long that way. It would numb the life out of her, as I've seen it happen to other farm women, until she was parched dry and her face looked like clay cracking under a July sun.

Well, that wouldn't happen to Myrna. And I wished I could tell that to Charlie.

I wished I could tell him how

I'd almost cried when I saw the terrible black bruise above her soft white thigh. How last night I couldn't bear my body to hurt it more, and with agony I'd never known pulled away from her, my brain one red mass of hate for Hatchis. *Hatchis!*

Why hadn't I killed him there a few minutes ago!

No. That would ruin it. Even self-defense wouldn't be strong enough. I might still go to jail, because sympathy wasn't with a wife-stealer. And if I killed, Myrna would never understand it. I knew it had to happen some other way.

And it had to be now. If I let it go, sooner or later Hatchis would bushwack me. And maybe even Myrna, too. I'd read about things like that. "Husband goes berserk; kills wife and lover." And generally they got off with jail time.

There wasn't any need for Charlie to be in this. I could handle it alone. But he should be here, and Myrna and the sheriff. Maybe a few neighbors, too. Charlie could take the car and fetch Myrna from the motel at Oak Bend right away.

He looked at me and handed me the shotgun. "You better keep this," he said. "You got a peck of trouble."

"Maybe," I said. "But you know Hatchis. He's a coward."

He thought about that for a minute. "Just the same," he said, "if it was me I'd take a little vacation. But I know you won't, so . . ."

"Listen, if he'd meant business, he'd a done it in there when he had that .410 in my belly. I'm not worried about Hatchis comin' back here. He knows it won't do any good. So Myrna might as well come back . . ."

"Wait a minute—he sees her around here he'll come bustin'—"

"You bring her in the car. It'll be after dark when you get back—and if it'll make you feel any better you can have the sheriff drop around and speak to Hatchis. Then the Baily boys might drop around after chores for a game of pinochle. They don't much like Hatchis anyway, and they know about this."

"Listen—," he started, then turned a little away and said quietly, "Does she mean that much to you—that much?"

"She does."

"Somebody's gonna get hurt—killed maybe."

I was getting sore. "Not you, Charlie."

He looked sharp at me then, with a pain in his eyes, like I had just slapped him. I wanted to say something and laugh it off. He turned and headed for the house. Later I heard the Chevy start and saw him drive away—right by Hatchis' house and that was good. My kid-brother Charlie. He would do with some growing up, and some of it that very night.

I finished dropping some hay bales down from the loft into the alley-way and then went to the

house and put the gun away. The binoculars were in the bedroom—the bedroom that would be Myrna's and mine—and after I got the binoculars I stood there in the middle of the room and thought of what a different room it was going to be now. It would be like it was meant to be—a room for living and making and giving life.

But first a life must be taken away.

I hurried back to the kitchen and scrawled the note; "Myrna and Charlie, Harris said the fence is down on the west 40 and the cows are out. I'll be back before supper. Charlie, I think it's best you stay here." Then I started to write something direct to Myrna, but gave it up. I left the note on the kitchen table, put the binoculars inside my shirt and struck out down the lane that led past the barn and up to the long high ridge that humped up and cut the farm in two like a hog's backbone. As I walked I could see Hatchis in his hayfield tinkering with his sulky mower. It had broke down a few days before, and it was when he went to town to get a part for it that Myrna had come to me with her few clothes. I only glanced at him once, but somehow I knew he had seen me climbing the ridge and was watching me even as he hammered away at the gear box or sickle.

Once over the ridge I settled down to watch him where he couldn't see me. The hammering stopped later, and when it began to get dusk I had to use the binoculars to see if he was there. I had been laying there about 45 minutes when Hatchis made his move. The moon was fair-to-middling bright and I saw his light colored shirt head for his house. He went behind some tree shadows and I didn't see him anywhere for a long time. I scanned the road that separated our farms, and finally I saw him, just a crouched shadow that could have been a hog. But it was him and he was moving fast below me, between me and my barn. He knew I'd likely come back down the lane, and that, anyways, he could see me no matter which direction I came from. He stayed by the fence that led to the barn and only with the help of the binocs could I see him slowly edging backwards to the barn. There the barn's big black shadow swallowed him. I thought about this for a minute and waited to see if he came out by the house. But he stayed in the cover of the barn. From there, especially the loft where he had hid out this afternoon, he could see all around—the house and the open yard behind it, and the lane down from the ridge.

I rolled over on my back and realized I was breathing deep and hard, and despite the cool night air, I had a high noon sweat. Thin clouds out of the west raced by, heading for the moon, and not too far off, heavier ones. I shoved the

binocs in my shirt and crawled over the edge of the ridge and stayed down until I reached the pump by the fence corner post. The pump squeaked loud as I filled the trough, and the hogs running up added to a sudden noise. I watched the dark clouds sailing closer, watched the barn too. Then my hand froze on the pump handle. Coming down the road was the headlights of a car. It was the Chevy and it turned into the driveway beyond the house. A second car screeched to a stop at Hatchis's place. Damn! Charlie had made the trip fast, and the other car was probably the sheriff. Well, that was the way I had wanted it, but now I wasn't so sure.

I decided to hell with the moonlight and hurried up the lane, staying close to the fence. When I was halfway to the barn the blackness came swiftly over me, then the barn and the door-yard beyond, and I raced with it to the edge of the alley-way. I had to hold down my hard breathing to listen for Hatchis. I felt a chill of fear in me and I thought: This is crazy! Damn this is crazy. He wants to kill you—kill you with a shotgun. And he could be an arm's length away, just inside the big open alley-way door. Or maybe I figured wrong. Maybe he's *outside* the barn, in a shadow and looking right at me. But the only shadow nearby was the one I was in. The sky seemed almost blinding bright. On the other side of the barn I could hear the horses stamping and rubbing their noses on the barn. They wanted to get into their corn and hay.

Hatchis was in the barn—but was he just inside the black alley-way? Or up in the loft? I figured the loft, because he was smart enough to know that up there he had me sure. He knew I was bound to come in the barn for choring, and he'd have a perfect shot from the hole above the ladder to the loft. Anyway that's the way it looked. There was only one sure way to find out as fast as it had to be now.

I walked inside, into the darkness, and threw some hay in the mangers. Then I waited, and in the stillness I heard the shotgun cocked. Yep, he was up there again.

"Hatchis," I said, "that's either you or some rats up there and I don't allow neither one in my barn. Now you come down, or as soon as I'm through hayin' the horses I'm coming up after you. You hear that?"

Silence.

Naturally, I had no intention of sticking my head up in that loft. That or getting right under the loft ladder hole would be the short end of it. So I decided to fox him—and at the same time set a pitchfork trap that would solve my problem of how to get rid of Hatchis. He'd kill hisself!

I found the pitch fork and eased over to the ladder. The ladder was about in the middle of the barn and

ran straight up from the floor, nailed to the front of a horse stall manger. Quietly I worked the pitchfork handle down between the first rung of the ladder and the manger boards. This left the tines out from the ladder about fourteen inches or so, and pointing right up at the hole, just waiting for Hatchis to leap down at me again. I got a bale of hay on my shoulder, and set its bottom corner up on the tines with its top resting against the upper part of the ladder. The way it was balanced there it wouldn't take much to knock it to the ground.

Then I got around to the *back* side of the ladder. I knew when Hatchis heard me start to climb up the back of the ladder, in the dark he'd naturally think I was coming up the *front* side. He couldn't miss —he'd figure all he had to do was shoot straight down the ladder.

Of course, when he did that, the bale of hay on the tines would get knocked off—sound like me falling to the loose hay on the ground. All I had to do then was groan real loud like I was still alive—he'd come leaping down like he'd done that afternoon—to finish me off with another shot or a knife.

But he'd be the one that'd be finished.

I took a deep breath, and got ready to start up the ladder when I saw a man with a gun standing in the middle of the doorway. Hatchis! I thought. Damn him—he's foxed *me*.

Then I saw it was Charlie. Charlie! He had come right out looking for me anyhow. If he had just waited another couple of minutes! But it would still work—it had to.

Before he could say anything I ran out to him and pulled him away from the door.

"He's in the loft," I whispered.

"You should have brought this," he said, shoving my shotgun at me.

"You keep it," I said. "You can help smoke him out." He started to say something about that but I went on. "You got Myrna all right? She's at the house and okay?"

"She's okay," he said, "and I think the sheriff's waiting at Hatchis's to talk to him."

"He figures there's only me," I said. "So you take the gun and go around the other side there and climb up to the mow from the outside. When you hear me talking to him, he'll be lookin' right down the hole. You say 'Drop it, Hatchis,' and we got him."

I watched Charlie and could see he didn't like it. I didn't like it either, but he was here now. It could mean that he'd have to shoot Hatchis and he knew it. Without saying a word, he took the gun and disappeared around the corner of the barn. It made me feel good. At last he was showing some guts, maybe growing up.

From now on I was figuring to feel real good about a lot of things. No more just dreaming and looking at Myrna in the binocs across

the road, no more having her sneak to me as she did the last week. Only a few days it had been! But it seemed like weeks, just as Hatchis had tried to make out—when he'd called her a tramp and beat her and kicked her there in that tender place. Well there'd be no more Hatchis, and I felt good about that.

And Charlie would help, so it looked like he understood better now—that just going to fetch Myrna back from the motel he got to know her a little better and realized she was really good and worth getting rid of Hatchis.

When I thought Charlie was in place at the hay mow door, I went back to the manger and crawled up behind the ladder. "Hatchis!" I yelled. "I said get out of there or I'm comin'—"

The shotgun blast roared through the whole barn and red light flashed across the square above me. Then I heard footsteps and Charlie swearing. "That's for the beatings, Hatchis, and the filthy bruise on her . . ."

The word struck my brain like the gunshot all over again. He hadn't meant to say it . . . *the bruise . . . the filthy bruise, Myrna's blacked scabbed sore . . . where only I could have seen it. How and Charlie, my kid brother . . .*

"Quick, I think I killed him."

I saw it: Charlie and Myrna . . . at the motel. My brother . . . God, it was a *lie!* Like Hatchis lied when he said she'd been sneaking over here for weeks. He said he thought it was my brother . . . and now—

"Hollis—you all right? Where are you?"

Charlie wanted Hatchis and me to kill each other . . . was it Myrna, too? Together, Charlie and Myrna planned this together . . . No! Godammit, no! There had to be some other reason. He's my brother—he knows I love Myrna. She just told him about the bruise. She told him . . .

"What'll I do, Hollis?"

"I'm comin' up." I took two steps up the back side of the ladder when the .410 exploded and sent its shot deep into the top bale of hay, knocking it off the tines to the floor.

"No—no! Charlie, don't!" I tried to yell, but it came out a terrible groan just like I had planned for Hatchis.

He plunged down a few inches in front of me. The scream ripped through me and I felt the sharp tines tear into his body and I doubled up from the pain.

In a little while I heard people coming—the sheriff, the Baily boys and Myrna. I climbed down and found the end of the broken handle. I got the pitchfork out before they came with the lights.

Mr. G. Conrad Harwell was a marriage counselor whose heart pumped the milk of human kindness. One way or the other, his services were absolutely guaranteed.

THE FINAL SOLUTION

BY
WILLIAM W. STUART

A SHIFTLESS, no good, dirty old man, that's all," announced Martha Tupple in her air-raid siren of a voice. "That's all," was purely a point of rhetoric. In point of fact, Mrs. Tupple, a task force of stoutly middle-aged woman, at least equal to anything, more than equal to any man, always had a great deal more than that to say about her husband. She had said it before. She would say it again; and again and again—as her husband, George Tupple well knew.

Such being the case, George Tupple took quick advantage of her pause for breath to slip in three clearly heartfelt words. "Ugly old witch," he said, and snorted.

Mr. G. Conrad Harwell listened with head shaking sorrow to this exchange. Mr. Harwell sat broadly, back of his broad, neat desk in his neat, newly rented office, a broad, warm, genial man built of sweeping curves, no planes or harsh angles apparent. By present profession Mr. Harwell was a marriage counselor, dedicated, as he said, to the cause of world peace, "starting at

the true grass roots, dear friends, bringing happiness and harmony to the hearths and homes, to the very heart, of our great land; harmony and happiness, friends."

He, of course, was a bachelor, a status he considered essential to a proper impartial objectivity in the rendering of his services. "How many umpires play baseball, hm-m? How many?"

Also in keeping with the nature of his calling, he exuded an aura of friendly happiness and hopeful harmony. His appearance, seated benignly behind his desk, was that of Santa Claus as a somewhat younger man and with a clean shave. At the moment, however, his cheerful, outgoing goodwill was overshadowed by the stone walled hostility of his current clients, referred to him—he checked their card—by some simple minister or other.

George Tupple, a thin, embittered looking man with a great length of unhopeful nose, glared across this bridge of snores and snorts at his wife, a small satisfaction glinting in sad brown eyes at having squeezed a long considered opinion in edgewise.

"Now, now," said Mr. Harwell, "now, now. Please." But his clients were unpleased.

Mrs. Tupple drew a deep breath to carry on. "A fumbling, stumble crumb bum," she said on a rising high note, "from the very start." She was now set to cover 27 years of husbandly failure, day by day, if not hour by hour. "On our honeymoon—a forty mile bus trip to Wachupee Falls, just in time for bean picking on his Uncle Al's farm—do you know what he . . ."

But George Tupple was on his feet, after rising in fury from one of the two straight chairs on either side of the front of Mr. Harwell's desk. "Lying old bat," he shouted, achieving a surprising resonance from a concavity of chest.

"Bum! No good, shiftless . . ."

Rebuttal, however, and buttal and re-rebuttal were all drowned by a powerful blast on a police whistle, ear-stabbing in the medium small office. A non-descript, dull looking man with unclear black eyes, slit mouth, wearing a too-small pie-top hat apparently borrowed for the occasion, slid into the office to stand without motion or emotion just inside the side door to the office.

"Ah," said Mr. Harwell, taking the whistle from his mouth but holding it ready. "Arthur. Arthur, this is Mr. and Mrs. George Tupple. I feel you should get to know one another. Mrs. Tupple, Mr. Tupple —this is my confidential associate, Arthur. Just Arthur, hm-m? More confidential that way, I feel; more confidential."

Arthur looked at them opaquely, first one and then the other, and managed the slightest of nods.

"Well now." Mr. Harwell smiled cheerfully. "We do seem to be at something of an impasse, don't we? Whup! Whup!" He raised whistle

to lips again warningly as George and Martha Tupple drew breath to start a new round. "This is not unusual, believe me. But there is no such thing as the impassable impasse, eh? No such thing. We shall simply have to take a small detour. Private interviews with each of you in turn, eh? Private interviews. Please! Rev. Hogarth recommended you to me most warmly. And remember, if I should fail to find a satisfactory adjustment for you, there is no fee. But where there's a will there's a way, eh?" Where there was a fee there was a will, too.

"There is a way and I will find it. Now then, Mrs. Tupple? Ladies first, eh? Ladies first. If you will stay where you are, we'll just have us a nice little private chat, you and me, about this husband of yours. Yes." Mr. Harwell rose rotoundly from his faintly creaking swivel chair. "Mr. Tupple?"

Mr. Tupple was still standing. Mr. Harwell put a warm, friendly hand on his back and guided him gently toward the side door. Arthur, abruptly, nodded another fraction and slipped out. Mr. Harwell spoke in a softly confidential voice to Mr. Tupple. "Only about an hour, sir, if you will; while I-ah-make my diagnosis of Mrs. Tupple's-uh-condition. Let's see, this is Saturday afternoon, eh? Just between us, Mr. Tupple, there is a very pleasant little bar just across the street. Why don't you stop in there and-ah-relax a bit, eh? Relax."

A man with some sense at that, this Mr. Harwell and he had a lot of it in that suggestion. Mr. Tupple smiled faintly. He had been debating a comparable course of action with himself. He was glad to have an official sanction for his winning argument.

"And come back at two-thirty, eh? Arthur will let you in the side door; two-thirty."

Mr. Tupple left, a visible bounce in his step. In the office, Mrs. Tupple's lips compressed in a grim line as the door closed behind her husband.

However, something like an hour later at just short of two-thirty as Mr. Harwell ushered her to the front office door, she looked, not necessarily mellowed, but somewhat doubtfully, grimly pleased. "We will then," Mr. Harwell was saying jovially, "regard our little-ah-arrangement for the elimination of marital stress as tentatively agreed. So, unless I hear to the contrary from you before the close of business Monday, we shall proceed; at our discretion of course, eh? Our discretion."

"Well-l-l . . . ," Mrs. Tupple, normally a woman of marked decisive qualities, hesitated; then firmed. "Yes; I guess so. But you won't do anything until after Monday? You-'re sure of that?"

"Quite sure, dear lady; quite sure. Now, if you will excuse me—almost time for me to have my little chat with Mr. Tupple, eh? Probably get

some very useful information. Oh yes, very useful." He closed the door behind her, smiling warmly.

A few minutes later, also smiling, less warmth, more beer, George Tupple walked down the hall toward the Harwell office. Outside the side door stood Arthur. Not, apparently, waiting for anything; just standing, face blank and empty, hat tilted forward. But, as George Tupple turned toward the door, he held up a warning hand, then slid through the doorway. He was back almost at once to motion George in with a tilt of the head.

"Ah!" said Mr. Harwell, rising from his desk, "Mr. Tupple, eh? Good to see you again; good, good. I had a most informative chat with Mrs. Tupple; most informative. My, my! Please do sit down. Quite a strong minded woman, isn't she? I gather you have, over the years, found her-ah-somewhat difficult. Would you care to tell me about it?"

George Tupple would, with the eloquence of strong feeling ably supported by adequate beer. He spoke for some twenty minutes without pause. Mr. Harwell had the police whistle out when he was finally interrupted by an irresistible belch.

"Well yes," agreed Mr. Harwell, "I see. But then . . . you must have been fond of her once, eh?"

"Huh?" It was a thing that hadn't come to mind in a long while.

"Fond of her once, weren't you? Fond of her?"

"Uh. Yeah, I suppose, come to think on it. Huh! Marty—I called her Marty—she was a handsome woman once; s'a fact. Used to call me her Georgie Porgie. Hard to believe, ain't it? Nothing to what she calls me now. By God, you know what she . . ."

"Yes, yes; I know. But once?"

"Yeah. There was a spell there, I recollect, when me and the old lady hit it off pretty good." He pulled thin lips up in a faint leer. "Even picking them beans, we had us a honeymoon, right enough. But . . ."

"Of course, Mr. Tupple. Regardless of beginnings, I quite understand that for many years now your situation has been quite impossible, eh? Quite impossible. Get's to be more than a man can stand, doesn't it?" Mr. Harwell's round face was filled with the warmest sympathy. "Yes. And divorce, of course, is morally wrong."

"Cost a man a lot of money, that foolishness."

"Well, Mr. Tupple, most things cost money these days. Sometimes we have to spend money to make money, eh? Spend to make. But divorce . . . certainly I oppose it always. Do you know, Mr. Tupple, there has never been a divorce among my clients? Never a divorce. Well. Ever thought of killing the old witch?"

"Huh?"

"Of course you have. What husband hasn't, at least occasionally, eh? What husband hasn't? And in

your case, with such an intolerable situation for so long a time . . . why didn't you do it?" Must have had plenty of chances, eh? Why didn't you do it?

"What, and go to the blasted gas chamber for doing in the old bat? Not me. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction."

If there was some failure there of clear, logical follow through, the Tupple shyness of the gas chamber was still clear enough logic. Mr. Harwell nodded thoughtfully. "A good reason," he said, "Quite. Her life isn't worth yours, eh? Not worth yours."

"Well," said George Tupple, darkly, "I'll admit there's been times I wondered; the life she leads me."

"Ah-ha! Of course you have. And suppose, just suppose I told you of a way to rid yourself of this-ah-blight of your life and at absolutely no risk. That would interest you, eh?"

George stared a minute. Pulled thoughtfully at his length of nose and, at length, said flatly, "You wouldn't do it."

"You are right. Of course I wouldn't dream of such a thing. Never dream of it."

George Tupple snorted disgust and started to get up.

"But Arthur, my-ah-associate, you recall? Now Arthur has some rather special talents; quite special."

"You mean he would?"

"Arthur, Mr. Tupple, is what we might call an accident prone individual; but not accident prone in the ordinary sense; not ordinary. Accidents somehow seem to pursue poor Arthur—without ever, I might add, actually happening to him. They happen to people near him. People, for example, quite unaccountably fall off curbs and under buses. It might surprise you, by the by Mr. Tupple, the settlements bus companies sometimes make with the-ah-bereaved mate of the victim of such an accident. Or—Mrs. Tupple is a large woman, is she not?—there are slippery staircases, elevator shafts, falling objects. Simply incredible, sir, the hazards that surround us every moment of our unsure little lives. Would you believe it, when we were conducting our clinic in Omaha, there was a lady . . . well, I shan't bore you with details. Terrible thing, truly; terrible for poor Arthur, sensitive as he is. But of course Arthur is a self-effacing sort, eh? No one ever notices poor Arthur; the faceless man in the crowd—the crowd at the accident. Fortunate thing, I suppose. It makes him terribly self-conscious, the way accidents keep happening around him; terribly self-conscious. But then—we needn't worry about Arthur, need we?" Mr. Harwell looked at George Tupple with a smile of pure good will.

George was still in some doubt. "I thought you was supposed to be a marriage counselor?"

"And I am, sir; I am indeed. My

life is dedicated, dedicated sir, to helping men and women keep their holy marriage vows. And, if I may say so, my record speaks for itself. Not one single case of divorce among all of my clients; not one case."

"Mph. Got a few widowers and, maybe, widows though, ain't you?"

Mr. Harwell shrugged and smiled. "My dedication is to helping people to keep the sanctity of their marriage vows, eh? Uphold the vows. You recall how they go, of course?"

"Huh? You mean that love, cherish—I do, I do . . ."

"Till death do you part, Mr. Tupple. Only till death do you part."

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it? Will you do it?"

"Do what, Mr. Tupple?"

"Will you kill my miserable old witch of a wife, Martha Tupple?"

"Of course not, Mr. Tupple. I told you before. I wouldn't dream of such a thing; wouldn't dream of it."

"But . . .?"

Mr. Harwell brought out his most genial smile. "But neither, naturally, could I give you any assurance that she will not meet with some unfortunate accident . . . next week, shall we say?"

Suspicion. "What'll it cost me?"

Mr. Harwell rose and moved, warmly confidential, around his desk. George Tupple got to his feet. The warm, friendly Harwell hand was on his shoulder. "Now, now, Mr. Tupple. I work for human happiness sir, not money; human happiness."

"What's that mean?"

"But naturally, sir, if, in memory of your dear-ah-departed wife and to further my great work, you should choose to make some love offering—say of any insurance there may be on her life—or if there were to be some settlement following a regrettable accident of some sort . . ."

"Hmph! Wouldn't want to touch blood money myself. OK. You got yourself a deal, Mr. Harwell." The beer was dying in George Tupple and he felt mean. "Make it next week and it's a deal. No sense dragging the thing out, by damn."

"Of course not, sir. If I do not hear to the contrary from you then, by Monday . . . ah. I understand that Mrs. Tupple is in the habit of visiting her sister who has an apartment here in town every Tuesday, eh? Rides the bus in? You must tell her to be careful, eh? Be careful. Traffic is terribly dangerous these days. Terribly dangerous. Good day sir."

George Tupple left. Stopped in at the bar across the street for a quick one—a quick two or three—before he stopped to pick up Martha at her sister's place for the ride home. Oddly enough, she had nothing to say, either about his lateness or his breath. More than enough oddly, the drive home to their place back of his garage out on the highway

was quiet. He stole looks at her along the way, out of the corner of his eye. She didn't look so awful actually, considering.

On Monday he left his garage in charge of young Tom Conners and told Martha he had an errand in town. ". . . so I got to pick up a-uh-carburator for Jouett's cad, Marty."

"Oh?" she said. "Oh. Well, fact is, Georgie, I figured I'd just go into town and visit Bessie today instead of Tuesday. So, if you don't mind, I'll ride along in with you."

"Sure," he said, cheerfully, "glad to have the company."

Later, after Arthur had kept him waiting in the hall for almost half an hour, he told Mr. Harwell, "No sir. I-uh-well, I just thought it over, that's all; and I changed my mind."

"Ah?" said Mr. Harwell with his warm, friendly smile, "and how was that, Mr. Tupple?"

George shrugged, a touch ruefully perhaps. "Kind of hard to put it into words but . . . well, hell, I got to studying the old lady, her and me, all of it. We been through a lot together, you know? And maybe I ain't always been too easy to go through it with. Sure, she's been a mean old witch these last years but . . . funny thing, Mr. Harwell, this past day or two since we talked to you, seems like she's been a lot quieter; don't get on me all the time. Friendly almost, you might say and she, well, she looks at me different. Fact is, Mr. Harwell, I got to admit I'd miss her."

Mr. Harwell's smile achieved new dimensions of warm humanity. "Well sir," he said, "I just can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear you say that; just can't tell you. A marriage saved, sir—it tells me I have not lived in vain." He got up back of his desk and stood there, a rotound, benign figure of a man.

George Tupple stared in sudden suspicion. "Say," he said, "all that stuff about killing . . . I mean about the accident. I don't believe you ever meant a word of it."

Mr. Harwell chuckled, a warm bubbling overflow.

"Never meant a word of it," said George Tupple again in some irritation. Then he chuckled too. "Pretty cute though, at that. I got to hand it to you."

"Where there is a will there is a way, eh?" said Mr. Harwell. "Oh yes, there is always a way. You agree then, Mr. Tupple, that I have affected a full reconciliation between you and Mrs. Tupple?"

"I don't know about all that. But . . . yeah, I guess the old lady and me'll stick it out together, if that's what you mean."

"For better or worse, sir, of course; better or worse. Can mere man expect more? Fine. My fee is five hundred dollars."

"Oh now wait just one damned minute, Mr. Harwell. That's way too much."

"Sir? Too much for having saved your marriage—and, very possibly, two lives?"

"Two lives?"

"Your wife's, Mr. Tupple. Your wife's and, it could be, your own. You yourself said you wished to murder her—or to hire someone to do it for you."

"I. . ."

Mr. Harwell held up a hand for quiet. With the other he pulled open a desk drawer and flipped a switch. George Tupple heard the whirr of a tape recorder and then the warm, rich voice of Mr. Harwell. "Do what, Mr. Tupple?" it inquired.

"Will you kill my miserable old witch of a wife, Martha Tupple?" It was his, George Tupple's voice, clear and unmistakable.

Mr. Harwell cut the switch. "Five hundred dollars," he said, smiling warmly, moving around from behind the desk to place a warm, friendly hand on George Tupple's shoulder."

"Ugh." He'd pay it though.

"And perhaps an earnest prayer each night for Mrs. Tupple's continued safety, eh? Earnest prayer, sir, does perform wonders. You would miss her, sir, believe me; and she would miss you." He walked with George Tupple to the door.

A minute or two later he was sitting again at his desk, a heartening picture of goodwill toward man. And such, truly, were his feelings. Two five hundred dollar fees earned. Two bitter lives renewed and enriched. It gave a man—It gave G. Conrad Harwell a genuinely heartwarming sense of human value, of faith renewed, of service, to bring back together two lonely human souls as he had done.

He looked up. Arthur had slipped silently in through the side door. Arthur's colorless eyebrows raised above dark, muddy eyes.

"Ah well, Arthur," said Mr. Harwell kindly, "not this time."

The corners of Arthur's thin lips gave a barely perceptible twitch.

"Now Arthur, please," he said, "patience, eh? Patience; and faith. I know you wish to-ah-help your fellow man, that you find inactivity irksome."

Arthur stared at him without expression.

Mr. Harwell smiled warm encouragement. "Try to look at it this way, Arthur. This city has a population of some 950,000; at least 300,000 of them are married. With odds like that . . . why it's a sure thing, Arthur, as sure as a thing can be." He looked at his watch. "I have a couple coming in at ten. Our circular to the churches is bringing them in, eh? Bringing them in. Oh yes, Arthur, there will be opportunities for you to serve; loads of opportunities."

Arthur slipped quietly back out the side door. There was an angry knock at the front. Mr. Harwell smiled warmly. "Come right in, dear friends," he said; warmly.

(Continued from other side)

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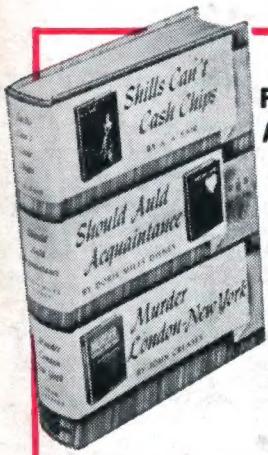

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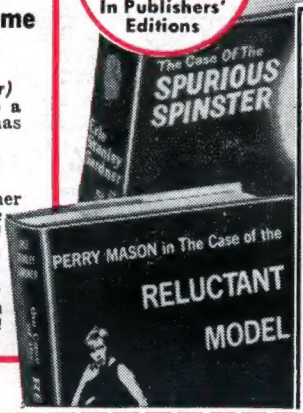

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